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OR, THE
**TWIN TOLL-TAKER'S
TANGLE.**

A STORY OF
**Captain Crook and His Merry Men
at Skeleton Camp.**

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AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN CROOK AND HIS MERRY MEN.

"WHAT do you fellows stand it for? Why don't you organize and run them down?"

"To run them up, later?"

"Surely their lawless deeds merit some punishment?"

"Possibly. And yet, don't you know? If each one of us received our fit reward, there'd

"YOU HEARD ME CALL HIM JASPER AUSTIN, SIR. THIS REWARD IS OFFERED FOR CASPAR AUSTIN." SAGEBRUSH SANDY WAS LEANING LIGHTLY UPON THE COUNTER.

be mighty little danger of rubbing elbows out in this wooden country."

"Who is he, anyway?"

"Captain Crook, do you mean?"

"Yes. From what I heard back at Dirigo, last night, he must have been operating in this section for some time."

"The better portion of a year, I reckon."

"Long enough to set the whole country-side on fire against him, one would think! And yet, here he still flourishes, while you fellows—not that I mean to cast any slurs in your face, of course."

"Don't mention it; you can't hurt a Christian," came the laughing rejoinder, a half-malicious devil sparkling in those keen brown eyes the while. "Just ask the next fellow you happen to meet, and he'll tell you the same—that Sagebrush Sandy is thoroughly case-hardened against any such small shot as slur or hint; that he is perfectly satisfied with his present surroundings, and ready to stack up his wealth at long odds that a finer country with a choicer selection of inhabitants can't be found on the wide face of this globe than right here and right now—amen!"

Lightly came the words and glibly uttered, his face wearing a smile which seemed good-nature itself; yet back of all seemed to lie an earnest purpose which little favored a jest in return.

The two men rode on side by side in silence for several minutes, seemingly in no hurry to reach their journey's end, although the sun was westering fast, and that warm afternoon was already more than half spent.

Then he who had spoken last again broke the silence by saying:

"Who is Captain Crook? That's a puzzle which more than you have tried to solve, stranger, without making a dazzling success at it. Some sort of a tough nut, I reckon, who thinks it's easier work to pick other pockets than to fill his own by hard labor."

"Then you don't know just who he may be?"

"Well, scarcely! Hanging would follow mighty close upon knowing, but the gallant captain hasn't climbed a tree yet, to my knowledge."

"Do you think—that is—of course, he confines himself to robbing stages, principally?"

"As a rule, yes; but, like all other rules, this one has its exceptions. Let the captain get wind of any other ripe plum, and he'd hardly stop to ask whether it came by stage or on foot-back. So—are you so dead-stuck on meeting him, stranger?"

"I? Why should I be?"

Again Sagebrush Sandy laughed, softly, with that sparkle in his big brown eyes as they ran over the face and figure of his companion; then turned his gaze to vacancy ahead.

"Oh, I don't know exactly, only—somehow it seems something more than empty curiosity, this feeling of yours for Captain Crook and his merry men. For instance, you're not in the detective line, are you?"

A start and a laugh at this; but one seemed forced, the other artificial, in spite of the denial which followed.

"I a detective? No, no, Mr. Sandy, since that appears to be your name—"

"Nickname, rather," was the amendment. "I'm Alexander Sage, but the frisky lads couldn't stick to that, and in consequence I had to be christened over, coming forth as Sagebrush Sandy, the Sport at Large. Very much at your service, too, Mr.—ah?"

"Eades—Arnold Eades. Not a detective, I assure you, sir, but a lawyer. Bad enough, of course; yet still a notch or two above the other, don't you think, Mr. Sage?"

"Each man to his own trade, Mr. Eades. And yet, should you put it just that way, 'twould bother me to say which one I'd like least to have hovering on my track—lawyer or detective."

"I hardly fancy either would trouble you very much."

"No, since I'm not a fugitive from justice," came the retort as the two rode along, keeping to the fairly well beaten stage-trail which linked Dirigo to Skeleton Camp, then in its prime as a silver-producer. "As for Captain Crook, that's different. 'Twould be a mighty bold man-hunter who'd dare tackle him out here on his own stamping-grounds."

"Then he's all they painted him back yonder in Dirigo?"

"I was only on the edge of that little seance, remember, so couldn't say as to that; but, one thing is plain enough for a blind man to read: This Captain Crook is bad medicine, and I'd want more than one rabbit-foot before I tackled him with my eyes open."

"But, if he robs the stage so often—"

"Not often, yet often enough, too!"

"I should think the owners of this line would take some measures to abate the nuisance. Surely there are men enough to enlist for such a campaign? Yourself, for instance—"

"Thanks, awfully, but I'd rather be excused! Not that I'm a coward—who'd admit the like of that?" with another half-mocking chuckle. "But it's catching before scotching, and this gallant toll-taker of ours naturally prefers to do the catching himself."

"You mean?"

"That 'twould be easy enough to abate this nuisance, as you call it, if one could only know just when and just where to strike; but that's the rub! Captain Crook never advertises his plans, and I've yet to meet up with the fellow who is smart enough to divine them in advance. So there you have it!"

"But, if those who were held up were to resist—"

"They'd help pile up the bloody score already set down to the captain's credit," bluntly interrupted the Sport at Large. "It's easy enough to talk, partner, and I reckon I've done my full share of that same chin-music, but action is a mighty different sort of thing. A man may mean all right, but here's the difficulty: in a genuine hold-up the other fellow has the drop before he chirrups, and there you are!"

The two men had been riding along that portion of the route which overlooked the river, a sharp descent of two-score feet at their left until the water's edge was reached, with an irregular steep on the right, the road-bed in places having been blasted out of the hillside, as marks of drill and pick plainly evidenced.

Now they veered away from the river, entering a more agreeable portion of the trail, the road-bed widening, the foliage strengthening as trees and bushes became more plentiful and bare rocks less numerous.

A gentle descent of something like a third of a mile, with here and there slight bends and curves in the road, carried them to a level lying between the two rises.

Still chatting, mainly about Captain Crook and his band of evil-doers, the two rode on, neither dreaming how surely they were going to their fate!

Presently they came to where a flowering vine had flung its scented coils from one tree to another on the opposite side of the road; and, slackening his pace, Sagebrush Sandy rose in his stirrups to grasp at the gently swaying flowers.

A snap, and he partly lost his balance, giving a little exclamation as he caught at the pommel for support.

"Hello! What's wrong now?" cried the lawyer, jerking up his nag and turning partly around in his saddle.

"Nothing much; only a—stirrup-leather snapped, and—so-ho, lad!" at the same time swinging himself from the saddle to the road. "Go on, pardner; I'll catch you up in a minute."

Already his head was under the saddle-flap, and almost without thinking

Arnold Eades obeyed, riding ahead at a leisurely pace.

Just ahead lay a bend in the trail, and less than a minute carried the lawyer out of sight of his companion, who he expected would follow speedily.

Instead, the greatest surprise of his life!

That bend in the trail was only a few score rods to the rear, and all ahead seemed clearest sailing, without aught to awaken suspicion of evil or of danger, until—

"Down him, lads!"

Sharp and distinct came that command; but ere Eades could make a move or utter a cry the work was done! A lasso closed about his shoulders, and, with a vicious pluck, tore him from the saddle!

One cry he gave, fierce and shrill, such as a strong man might utter when finding himself ensnared to his death—a cry which echoed from rock to rock and floated afar, though cut short by contact with the rough road-bed.

"Look alive, there!" added that same commanding voice as several masked figures broke cover. "Pinch that howler and nail the nag, you! If either breaks away, I'll—steady, now!"

An active knave jumped at the head of the startled animal, gripping reins and closing muzzle with the other hand, almost instantly completing that portion of the capture, while other men pounced upon the lawyer and held him fast by legs and arms, although the fall had temporarily paralyzed him.

"Pinch, but don't croak," warned the leader, coming forth from ambush, but taking no active part in that capture. "Unless I'm 'way off my base, this fellow is a prize which—the devil!"

It was only one cry Arnold Eades uttered, but it went past yonder curve in the trail and reached the ears of the Sport at Large, causing him to start and listen, then to spring into saddle and move ahead, at the same time looking to his weapons.

A brace of business-like revolvers were in readiness when the gray horse rounded that turn in the road.

A single glance sufficed to show just what sort of mischief was going on ahead, but Sagebrush Sandy checked rather than urged on his mount, as one less cool and steady of nerve might have done on impulse.

He saw that Eades had been roped and pulled out of the saddle, but he saw more—at least half a score armed men there in the road, making a living barricade which no single hand could hope to ride over or ride down.

Checking his horse so sharply made some noise on that stony soil, and possibly this came to the keen ears of the outlaw chief, yonder; at any rate, he turned that way with a fierce cry, throwing up his pistol-hand as he did so, sending a grooved bullet on its mission.

Swift as thought itself came an answering shot from the Sport at Large, and then the leader of that lawless band fairly howled to his men, all the while working hammer and trigger the liveliest he knew how:

"Plug him, lads! Down him! Don't let him get away while—stop, you hot-head!"

Whether involuntarily or not, the horse ridden by Sagebrush Sandy sprang forward, coming with a rush, as though it fairly loved the smoke of battle; but, as the lead flew faster, it gave a shrill neigh, rearing high in the air before wheeling, as upon a pivot, to bound away in maddened flight.

Its rider seemed nearly pitched out of saddle, saving himself by a swift grip on mane or pommel, then lying low along that neck as his mount dashed away in full flight, followed still by those humming pellets of lead.

"He's got it—got it hard, too!" cried Captain Crook, jumping to one side and ducking his head low enough to peer through that screen of sulphurous

smoke. "Follow him, lads! Run him down, or there'll be the very old demon to pay!"

Half a dozen of his fellows rushed off down the road, some loading pistols while racing, others drawing an as yet unused weapon from holster, but each one seemingly bent on being the first man at the turn around which the fugitive had so recently passed.

With all eyes turned toward the Sport at Large, and all thoughts seemingly occupied with him, the roped traveler was temporarily forgotten by his assailants, and, rallying quickly from the effects of his fall, Arnold Eades struggled to arise, at the same time throwing off the lasso loop which had brought about his downfall.

Half-blinded, half-unnerved, he was fumbling for a weapon, when Captain Crook turned that way, giving an ugly growl as he saw what was going on, and making a pantherish leap which carried him fairly atop his human quarry.

"No, ye don't! Stay put, curse you!" he cried, savagely, as Eades went down before that attack, struggling desperately yet fruitlessly.

At any other time the lawyer might have given even Captain Crook a stiff argument, but now he was in poor fettle for fighting, and with seeming ease the outlaw gained the upper hand, catching time for a look down the road.

He saw his men draw near that turn in the trail, then slacken pace, to stop short, as though they began to realize the futility of chasing a mounted fugitive while they themselves were afoot.

Freeing one hand, the chief shook it fiercely in their direction as he cried out:

"Go on, ye whelps! Take him—alive for choice, but—take him, I say!"

With a sudden twist and writhe, Arnold Eades managed to shake that grip off his throat; then he put forth every effort he could summon to toss off or turn that masked antagonist, fighting for liberty or for life.

"Steady, you fool!" cried Captain Crook, turning his head and fetching both hands into play once more. "Steady now! I'm not so mighty sure, but I really think—you may be—well worth holding fast to, after all!"

With the odds all against him, Eades could make but a poor fight, and when other strong hands came to hamper his limbs, he yielded with the best possible grace, huskily crying out for quarter.

"All right; look after him, lads," ordered Captain Crook, rising to his feet and gazing down the stage road once more.

But his men had passed beyond his limited range of vision, rounding that bend in the trail, eyes flashing ahead, only to come back again to the blood-marks which now so liberally sprinkled the gray dust and weather-bleached stones.

"Tain't jest a graze, this yer!" cried one of the knaves as they pressed hurriedly along the painted trail. "Gee-blazes! he's leakin' wuss then a road-sprinkler!"

"It's mo' hoss then man-critter, reckon," amended one of his mates, "an' ef we jump the sport—look out fer heap fun!"

But it was not to come after that precise fashion, for the red spoor led them on and on to where the road-bed fairly overhung the brawling river, with never a glimpse of man or of beast, until—

"Thar—look!"

He was pointing away from the road itself, but more eyes than his had already caught that same awfully significant object, and the armed outlaws huddled there on the very verge of the nearly perpendicular fall, staring at a mangled carcass lying upon partially submerged rocks, nearly a score yards below their own level.

The carcass of a horse, as all could see. The same animal which had so recently been bestridden by Sagebrush Sandy, but

now dead, doubtless having plunged over that cliff in its dying agony.

The rider—where was he?

Again those roving eyes caught sight of a clew, and with finger pointing he called notice of all to the felt hat which lay halfway down those rocks, caught by a sharp point.

"He done went 'long, fer shore, an' now—good-by, John!"

"That's no lie, neither, Billy. Well, I'm not mournin' so turrible much, come to think it all over. It's a rough deal fer Sandy, but ruther him thar then up hyar, laughin' over his guns at us, you bet!"

CHAPTER II.

LAWYER OR LIAR—WHICH?

Such appeared to be the general impression, since no one of the little party offered an amendment.

The next few minutes were spent in searching yonder rocks and riffles for a human carcass, but without success. Change their position as they might, nothing could be seen of Sagebrush Sandy from the road-bed level.

With horse and hat to bear witness, however, there seemed no room for doubt—rider had shared the same fate as mount, and both were past giving further trouble to rogues or honest citizens!

With this conclusion, the road-agents leisurely retraced their steps, chatting by the way, mainly about the Sport at Large and how seriously Skeleton Camp might take his untimely demise.

"Fer he was 'way up with the cits, an' you know it, boys!"

"That's no scandal, neither; but a livin' man an' a dead dog is two things plum dif'rent. An' who's gwine to tell 'em all how come he so?"

"The birds o' the air, lackin' ary other body. You see. It's a nasty job, an' I don't keer who knows I'm thinkin' that way."

"Tell the boss so, pardy. Ruther you then me, though!"

So the talk went on, until the spot where Arnold Eades had been captured was reached, but which was now vacant, both captors and captive having passed away.

This fact did not bother the toughs long, and, veering from the road, they quickened pace until, reaching the spot where Captain Crook had retreated to, there briefly making their report.

The chief of road-agents seemed more than startled when that name was mentioned.

Eades was lying with back propped by a gray boulder, his limbs bound past giving trouble, but his eyesight unrestricted.

He both looked and listened, making his own interpretations and drawing his own deductions.

Captain Crook turned upon him eyes glittering brightly through the holes cut in his black face-covering. Possibly he saw how deeply interested this captive was.

"So much the worse for Sagebrush Sandy, then! And yet Sandy was a good-enough rascal, after his own particular fashion, and I'd hate to leave him as food for the fishes," the chief announced.

"Waal, boss, after takin' sech a tum'le as yen, I don't reckon Sandy's keerin' so mighty much fer that; no, I jest don't, now!"

"Button up, will you? Go take a closer look, you two fellows," with gloved hand indicating his preference, then drawing apart with them to add further instructions in a whisper which Arnold Eades vainly strove to catch.

After a few moments the pair hurried away on their mission, while the other ruffians withdrew in a slightly different direction, thus leaving Captain Crook alone with his prisoner.

Moving closer to the man in bonds, he stood there in silence for a full minute, during which interval those half-hidden eyes seemed searching face and figure, as though striving hard to recall past memory.

Arnold Eades bore that ordeal well, looking paler than ordinary, no doubt, but that might have come through his recent experience, or the natural dread which any honest man might have of harsh treatment at such lawless hands.

Captain Crook, still keeping silence, came closer, to stoop and deftly search the person of his captive.

A number of objects were brought to light, only to be replaced in pocket as being of no particular value, or being beneath the dignity of a full-fledged road-agent; then came a low cry as the captain brought to light a folded poster, covered with print and headed with a set of large figures in display type.

"Twenty thousand dollars reward, eh?" he cried, holding up the placard to run his eyes swiftly over the lines that followed, to end with the name at the bottom. "For Caspar Austin, or reliable proof of his death? Signed by Mallory Denport? And—who the foul fiend may you be, pardner?"

During all this the eyes of the prisoner were fairly ablaze, and there was a half-wolfish expression upon his face; but it vanished instantly as Captain Crook broke off his muttered comments by bluntly asking that question.

If finding that placard gave the road-agent matter for questioning, it likewise offered the bound man a hint, for his answer came promptly enough, even if it did steer clear of the truth.

"You have my name right there, sir," he declared, coolly, nodding his head toward that poster. "I am Mallory Denport."

"Is that so?" with an echo as of surprise. "And you put forth this document, of course?"

"Since my name is there—yes. Can you tell me anything—"

"Steady, my friend! Learn to peddle before you trade. And you are Mallory Denport? What profession, may I ask?"

"The law. I'm looking for one Caspar Austin, and I had a fancy he might be found out here in this section. If you can aid me in finding the said party, or give me any information by means of which—"

"Take breath, please: I'd hate to have you burst a flue, honest. You want to find a man named Austin, is it?"

"Yes."

"To clap him behind the bars, or to send him up a tree without the trouble of climbing, of course?"

Captain Crook spoke with real or affected carelessness, but to Eades it seemed as though under that surface lurked actual uneasiness. Could it be possible that, after all, his goal was so nigh?

Was this masked outlaw the one for whom he had searched so long and so eagerly? Was this—

"How long does it take you to hatch up a lie, pardner?" asked the chief of road-agents with an ominous sneer.

"Why should I lie, sir?" asked the captive, with assumed meekness. "I took it you were only joking, and so—no, sir! So far from meaning harm to Caspar Austin, I'm working wholly and solely in his interests, and if I can find him—maybe you can give me a hint, sir?"

"Or a kick. I fancy you're earning that more than anything less."

"I assure you, sir—"

"I know you do, and that's just what's the matter. I can love a knave, sympathize with a rascal, pity a fool, but when it comes down to a liar—excuse me!"

"Why should I lie to you, sir? What could I possibly gain by it?" asked the captive, with an injured demeanor.

"Not a blessed thing; but you haven't fully realized so much, I imagine," came the cool retort. "For instance: you say your name is Mallory Denport?"

"I did: yes."

"And you are a lawyer by profession?"

"I am."

"Not!"

"What do you mean by that? Surely I ought to know best who and what I am."

"Doubtless you do, but you're not giving it up to me, all the same. And that's right where you're making a bad enough matter heap sight worse. For, unless you have serious reasons for lying, why take the trouble to wear a verbal mask at all?"

"I don't understand—"

"That's another lie," rudely interrupted Captain Crook. "But we'll leave it for future nailing, in case that course seems wisest. You are trying to find a fellow called Caspar Austin, is it?"

"I told you as much, and you surely read for yourself," surlily, with a glance toward the placard still held by that gloved left hand.

"Why do you wish to find the gentleman, pray?"

The prisoner hesitated, but only for a few moments. Then, like one deeming it wisest to throw aside all pretense, he made reply:

"Well, sir, I'll tell you, honestly. There's been a big pile of money and money's worth left behind him by a dead man. If I can find Caspar Austin, I can make him independently rich for the rest of his life."

"A fortune, is it? About how large, pray?"

"A million, at least, counting only his share. If you can—"

"Wait a bit. You can fetch all this to pass? In your own person, or as Mallory Denport?"

What underlay that sneer? Surely this outlaw could not know the man whose name crossed his masked lips so glibly? And yet—

But he was fairly committed to that name, and so the captive spoke:

"As either, or both. I am Mallory Denport, as I told you before."

"And lied while shaping the words," swiftly retorted his captor, with an impatient gesture. "Mallory Denport is a man of full three-score, while you are twenty years less, at the very least."

"Naturally, since I am his son, and named after my father," coolly asserted Eades, meeting that burning gaze unflinchingly.

"His son?" echoed the outlaw.

"I said it. Shall I make oath to the same thing, pray?"

A low, sneering chuckle followed from those covered lips, by its very sound warning Arnold Eades that he was being led still further into a dangerous maze, from whence he might hardly escape now with life.

"How long since you were acknowledged, my dear fellow?" asked the chief of toll-takers, a few seconds later.

"What do you mean by—acknowledged?"

"Just what I say: how long since Mallory Denport acknowledged his paternity? For, to my certain knowledge, the old gentleman has never been married, but is an incorrigible old bachelor to this very day!"

The prisoner gave a surly growl at this speech, but otherwise showed neither discomfort nor fear for himself.

"It's truth, all the same, whether you credit me or not."

"Credit you? I do—with being as bald-faced a liar as ever I met up with in a long and varied experience! Why, you infernal scoundrel, you! Mallory Denport? Lawyer? Bah!"

"You are no lawyer, but a liar! You are no friend to Caspar Austin, but a glaring fraud! Instead of a fortune, it's a hangman's noose you hold in waiting for the fugitive! Dare you deny this, you villain?"

"Of what avail would denial be with such as you?"

"Never a bit, and that's flat!" bluntly admitted the outlaw, laughing again and after a far from agreeable fashion as he stood before the bound and helpless man, eyes gleaming through the slits in his mask.

"I knew as much, and so—"

"Because I've heap-sight more than vague suspicion to go upon," quickly added the road-agent. "Because I not only know all about Mallory Denport, for years back, but because I know just what and who you are, you infernal blood-sucker and man-hunter!"

"I am not—"

"But you are, and here goes to prove it," again interrupted the road-agent, giving his prisoner a rude shove with his foot by way of additional hint to hold his peace.

"Your lawful name is Arnold Eades, and for years past you have been in police service. You were a spy, or shadow, in the Pinkerton service at first, then were promoted for dirty work to order, coming forth as a full-fledged deputy under the Old Fox's cubs."

"You made a lucky strike or two, the praise for which cocked you up so high that you fancied you held the whole world by a shirt-tail grip: in other words, that your independent fortune was already as good as won."

"You broke off with the Pinkertons, setting up in business for yourself. And now, thinking this little twenty thousand chunks was worth the effort, you prance out here, tail-on-end, to rake it in—like tiths!"

Captain Crook spoke so rapidly that his captive had scant chance to slip in word or objection; but now he spoke, saying:

"I deny everything you allege, sir, and defy your proof. I am a lawyer, and my name is Mallory Denport."

"You are a liar, and your name is Arnold Eades. You have more than one string to your bow, and one of those strings is—"

"Look ye here, you infernal blood-sucker! Who set you on the track of Captain Crook and his merry men? Who pays you for ferreting out our secrets? Who, I demand?"

"And I deny, since there's nothing else for me to do with truth," bluntly asserted the bound and helpless man. "I say again: I am not a detective, nor have I any notion of hunting mankind down to evil. I came out here hoping to find Caspar Austin—are you that individual, sir?"

The Captain laughed shortly, disagreeably; then made answer:

"No, I'm not Caspar Austin; but I'll tell you something else—if you are not all fool, you'll make a clean breast of it, Arnold Eades."

"I'm not Arnold Eades, but Mallory Denport."

"A lie, several times repeated. Now, listen, you scoundrel," moving a bit closer, bending lower to shake a gloved finger close in front of that face in grim warning. "Tell me the whole truth, or, by the devil your kin worships, I'll kill if I can't break will!"

"Who sent you out here to hunt me down? Who gave you the first clue? Speak out, you whelp of Satan, or—die like a dog!"

CHAPTER III.

SAGEBRUSH SANDY CHIPS IN.

Captain Crook meant every syllable that crossed his lips, or else he was an actor of more than ordinary merit; but he to whom those words were addressed showed irritation rather than fear for himself.

"Do your worst, since you can't recognize the plain truth when put before you," he cried, surlily.

"Try me once and see for yourself."

"Haven't I, then? Yes! I've told you the simple truth, not once, but repeatedly. I am Mallory Denport, and I am—"

"Lying fast as a mule can trot downhill! If you really couldn't do any better than that, I might make allowance, but as it is—this!"

Captain Crook gave a whistle, to which signal came a prompt answer; all save the pair sent to look further into the supposed death of the Sport at Large put in an immediate appearance.

With uplifted hand holding his cut-throats in check for the moment, their chief spoke sharply:

"If I tell you this fellow deserves death, my men, what would you do?"

"Administer the dose prescribed, you bet!" promptly assured one.

"Should I hint at torture before death?"

"He'd get it—right in the neck!"

"You hear that, do you, Arnold Eades?"

No answer, unless it might be in closing those broad jaws the more firmly.

The captain observed, and gave a brief chuckle.

"Excuse me, my dear fellow! Mr. Mallory Denport, I should have said."

"That's a little better. Yes, I hear your threats."

"And have nothing further to say about it, of course?"

"What use? I'm bound and helpless, one man against a dozen brutes. You demanded the truth, and I—"

"Gave me lies instead. For the last time, you bloodsucker, who and what are you?"

Again a grim silence, with eyes looking the defiance lips did not care to pronounce.

"All right! Lift him, lads!" cried the outlaw. "This way! Steady, now!"

Strong hands fastened upon the prisoner, lifting him bodily from the ground and hurrying him away in the direction indicated by the master.

Captain Crook himself sprang across to the edge of an irregular hole in the sloping ground, where pick and spade of prospector had been at work in days gone by.

The recent rains had formed a little pond there, gradually settling into the earth and leaving but a thin layer of sun-cracked mud. Evidently the ground was soft beneath that covering, although moisture itself had fairly evaporated.

The road-agent chief gripped Eades by one shoulder, holding him fast while he set his men to work, pointing out a dead cedar which had been uprooted, and now lay handy for his grim purpose.

A few words sufficed, and the dead sapling was lifted bodily to be stood upright in the middle of that prospect hole, then speedily secured in position with heavy stones and chunks of half-decomposed quartz.

With brutal force, Captain Crook sent his prisoner headlong into that narrow pit, there to be caught by strong hands and bound quickly to the cedar in an upright position.

Then, laughing and jesting viciously, the outlaws pushed and hauled dirt from about the edges, trampling it firmly about the feet of the doomed detective, everything going to show that he was to be buried alive!

And so it was meant to be, else Captain Crook falsified.

"Enough for now, lads," he said, with wave of hand. "Come out, and let the gentleman feel his own footing. Dick, you go look after the nags, and keep one eye peeled, yonder. The rest of you at ease!"

Now, as before, instant obedience was yielded, the roughs scrambling forth from the prospect hole, leaving the helpless traveler there to his fate.

A brief silence; then those questions were repeated, sternly; but the man who was forced to listen stuck doggedly to his former text.

"My name is Mallory Denport. I am a lawyer by profession. The Mallory Denport you profess to have known in days gone by is my father."

"Liar still! Your name is Arnold Eades. You are a detective by profession. You came out here expressly to—what? Tell me that, ye cur, or I'll bury you alive!"

"That title fits yourself far more closely than it does me, for you lie when you call me a liar. Now, do your worst!"

With that defiance the helpless man clenched his teeth, his face pale enough,

yet with scarcely a trace of craven fear to be read therein.

Captain Crook flung up a hand, and in ready compliance his men tore off chunks of dirt and tossed them into the prospect-hole, adding stones and gravel—anything which came handy and would serve to bury a living victim.

At times they paused, and as often the head demon would put his questions, varying them as fancy dictated, but ever trying to win a confession or an admission that he, the helpless one, was indeed a bloodhound of the law, come hither to ferret out crime and arrest criminals.

But as often the doomed man answered defiantly, or made reply by grim silence itself.

Dirt and stones kept pouring in, until the rising pile now neared the waist-level of their victim.

"Finish it, ye knaves!" cried the outlaw leader, as he saw how worse than vain were all his efforts to force an admission from those tight-locked lips. "Crowd in the dirt until—"

He broke off abruptly, turning part-way around as his right hand dropped to the butt of his forty-four, an alarm just then coming from where their horses had been left under guard of a single man.

A sharp, ringing yell floated that way, closely followed by a couple of pistol-shots; then came the confused trampling of shod hoofs upon stony soil, just as though a stampede had been effected.

So Captain Crook must have reasoned, for he sprung away in that direction, as he cried aloud:

"The horses! Come, ye devils! Shoot at sight, and—this way!"

All the road-agents followed, every man-Jack of them apparently forgetting the very existence of the half-buried prisoner.

He stared with wide eyes after them for a moment or two, but then strove desperately to burst his bonds or to wrench himself free from the dead cedar.

In vain; yet, though Arnold Eades realized how utterly helpless he was to free himself, 'twas not the nature of the man to yield while an ounce of fight remained in his body; so he struggled on, and—

"Easy, pardner!" called out a cheery voice from the rocks to one side of the prospect-hole, quickly followed by the form of Sagebrush Sandy himself, face aglow with exercise and big brown eyes full of reckless audacity the while.

Arnold Eades gave a cry at that apparition, for he had not doubted the truth of the report brought back by the outlaws.

The Sport at Large leaped into the half-filled prospect-hole, drawing his knife as he came, slashing swiftly at the thongs which had so effectively hampered his companion, tongue rattling on the while.

"Steady, now, old man! Sorry I couldn't chip in earlier, but I didn't see just how I could afford to tackle the entire regiment by my lonesome, and so—steady, bo'!"

Gripping his knife between his teeth to leave his hands free, Sagebrush Sandy stooped lower to tear aside several stones which covered the lower bonds, then again called cold steel into play.

A brisk twist and deft wrench, aided in no little by the man himself, finished the work of liberation, and the Sport at Large hustled his friend out of the hole and away among the rocks.

"It's touch and go, with the quicker we go the better, pardner! I couldn't stop to put on any fine touches, over yonder, and so I know—ah! that tells the tale, right now!"

Shouts and yells came floating to their ears, and Sandy made still greater haste, urging Eades on with hand as with voice, the two scrambling higher up the rocks.

Little time was granted them in which to move, for Captain Crook and his min-

ions were coming back, cursing and fuming, plainly suspecting the truth—that they had been tricked by some audacious enemy.

Those curses turned to cries of discovery as the two fugitives were sighted, now far up those precipitous rocks, and more than one revolver began to bark ere the road-agent chief shouted:

"Steady, all! And you, fools; come down out o' that! Come down, or we'll fetch ye—cold and kicking!"

This just as Sagebrush Sandy won the point for which he was struggling and pulling Eades down under cover, he hid all save a section of his own face while calling back:

"Keep your linen on, old fellow! What's the use in kicking up such a row when you can't—"

Captain Crook flung up his right hand for a snap-shot, his lead glancing from a rock close beside the Sport at Large, who laughed afresh as he returned the compliment in kind, and called out in clear tones:

"I say, you fellows! Why don't you get in the way of a bullet, just to make matters a bit more interesting? Why don't you—"

"If we come up after you—"

"Make your wills, first, for you'll never find a chance after. Come and take us, old man, for we're not coming down there—not this evening!"

"I don't—who the devil are you, anyway?"

For answer the other rose up from cover, exposing his athletic figure from waist upward, tipping back the leaf of his soft felt (confiscated from the luckless horse-guard, as it afterward proved,) with muzzle of revolver, then bowing gracefully as he spoke:

"Behold me, oh, ye scurvy knaves! Sagebrush Sandy, the Sport at Large, open for business from sun to sun and all the way back again! If you really wish for further information, just walk up to my front door, and I'll give you the very best I keep in stock!"

Instead of acting upon that information, or accepting that invitation, Captain Crook seemed to recoil, jumping behind a more perfect shelter, in which movement he was promptly imitated by his fellows.

The sport laughed lightly at this, but himself sunk out of sight; then speaking in hasty whispers to his companion:

"That's a bit of a bluff, pardner, but we can't count on its holding good for long, so reckon you can play crawfish for a few minutes?"

"Give me one of your pistols, Mr. Sage, and I'll stand off the gang until—"

"I'm not so thirsty, thank you! We'll play we didn't, for this once, if it's all the same to you, pardner. Tight squeeze, but I reckon we can make it. Got to, in fact! If not—well, this hole will make mighty unhealthy quarters when Captain Crook and his bullies come with a red-hot rush; yes it just will, now!"

Fairly shoving Eades through the opening ahead of himself, Sandy crept through a narrow crack between two boulders, then picked his way upward and backward, all the time keeping closely covered from sight of the enemy below, only drawing a full and free breath when, ten minutes later, he arose erect, fairly out of sight and sound of the road agents.

He chuckled like one full of glee at so deftly dodging the issue, but apparently Eades felt far less exultant, brows contracted and teeth grating as he looked over shoulder, muttering:

"If you'd only given me a gun, sir! We could have won out, hands-down! We might even—with those rocks to cover, we surely could have licked the whole outfit!"

"For what good!"

"They are outlaws, and he owned up to being Captain Crook!"

"With a price, placed upon his head? Yes, but I'm not in the man-hunting business. Mr. Eades, and if you are—"

well, I'd be almost sorry to think I'd taken extra trouble on account of a—ahem!"

Eades flushed under that keen gaze, but affecting to cast all regret aside, remarked:

"How did you contrive it all, sir? They said—I really thought you had gone to your death over yonder rocks!"

"My nag did, poor devil," quietly answered the Sport at Large, but keeping in motion the while, evidently with some certain destination in view which he was desirous of reaching as speedily as might be.

He explained what seemed so remarkable. His horse was hit hard and rapidly failing, though stung to brief-lived fury by those rankling bullets.

Feeling sure that he would be chased, and knowing how surely that bloody spoor would be read, Sagebrush Sandy watched his time, and at the last moment spurred his fated nag over those rocks, to perish far below.

He himself leaped safely out of the saddle, and sought refuge on the steep above the road, from thence viewing the road-agents as they came up and commented upon his supposed fate, afterward stealing across to learn what had become of his less fortunate companion.

This took some little time, thanks to the natural obstacles to be surmounted, the road being denied him; and then, realizing what deadly peril menaced the stranger, Sandy quickly hatched up a scheme which he fancied might prove a success.

He stole across to where the horses were guarded by a single man, taking him almost completely by surprise, knocking him down and out even as the fellow yelled for help; then he cut the animals free and sent them off with strokes and pistol-shots.

"You know the rest of it, pardner," added the Sport, with a grim chuckle. "And now if we can warn the Dirigo hearse in time to foolish those rascals, I'll feel mightily like calling it a fair day's work!"

"Then you really think—"

"Too late!" cried Sagebrush, sharply, as a shot rang forth. "We've mised it! The stage passed here while we were cutting across!"

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN CROOK COLLECTS TOLL.

It was not altogether fear of catching a bullet which led Captain Crook to make such a hasty jump for securer cover.

He had fully recognized his antagonist, and for reasons of his own preferred to check rather than head a rush in the muzzles of those spit-fire guns.

"Steady, lads!" he spoke in muffled tones. "We don't want any ruction with the Sport, after all!"

"We kin take 'em both ef you say so, boss," ventured one of the toughs, wincing as he rubbed hand across a barked shoulder, to fling aside the red drops with a flirt of his stumpy fingers.

"Not so easy as you seem to think," answered the chief, bending ear in listening for a few seconds. "For one thing, they're racking out."

"Shell we foller on, boss?"

"No, I tell you. Wait until—wait, I say!"

Wait they did, with more or less patience, until Captain Crook seemed fairly content; and then, rising from behind his cover, with a low chuckle and careless out-flinging of now unarmed hands, he bade his cohort to come forth.

"They've pulled out, hot-foot, easy enough. If any of you doubt as much, just skip up yonder and see for yourselves."

"We'll take your word fer it cap'n," from one burly brute, who had felt the hot sting of a lead pellet. "I done got my sheer. The boys kin hev all the rest, ef you don't mind, boss."

Just then the two fellows whom Captain Crook had sent to make closer investigation of that supposed death upon the

rocks, came, stealing guardedly up; but, relieved of apprehension by the actions of their chieftain, they began their report, only to be cut short by Crook.

"Never mind, now. 'Twas a slick bit of business, yet simple enough to make a full-grown man blush with shame at being so easily bamboozled. The horse went over the dump, of course, but the Sport—not any! He just made a double, and played us all for healthy old chumps!"

The horse-guard, nursing a pair of prize-ring black eyes, mumbled explanations and curses all in a jumble, but again Captain Crook cut short the speech.

"Never mind. One trick doesn't win the game, and our turn comes next. I know the fellow, now, and know right where to find him when the time is ripe. Until then, go your ways, Sagebrush Sandy!"

"And the other fellow, sir?" ventured another of the band.

"Belongs to me, individually. Bear that much in mind, one and all of you. He is my meat, hot or cold! I'll pinch the fellow when it comes time, and until then—drop it all!"

There was a gruff savagery about their master which gave small encouragement for argument or curiosity, and the servitors kept silence for the time being.

Without taking the trouble to scale those rocks to make sure the two men had really fled past taking, Captain Crook glanced at his watch.

"It's surely time, by now! Rack out, you two rascals, and keep all eyes skinned for game. When sighted, give the signal as you know it! Off with you, now! And the rest come look after the nags," was the order.

That horse stampede had been but one in semblance, for Sagebrush Sandy, however well he may have meant, had scant time in which to make his work effective.

Even before turning back to make sure of the prisoner, the animals had been collected and left in charge of a couple of guards, who took no chances of surprise as Dick Leach had fared before them.

Captain Crook took occasion to renew his instructions to his men while waiting for word from the expected stage-coach, for the recent episode could scarcely have been anticipated since the band had sallied forth expressly to hold up the "hearse" while making the run from Dirigo to Skeleton Camp.

This was already long past due, but Captain Crook had been prepared for that, as well, and though so many miles separated himself from the stage at the time, he knew all about the "accident" which caused that delay.

Scarcely had those instructions been renewed, than the expected warning was given, and without having seen either dead horse or bloody trail, the stage came bowling swiftly along, the driver trying his best to catch up with the regular schedule.

Although a veteran of brake and ribbons, Billy Johns was taken completely off-guard when the stern challenge burst forth.

"Wait a bit, Billy, please!" cried out Captain Crook as he took a long step from cover to the road-way itself, Winchester at shoulder for the moment, "To prove it—this!"

Crack-crack!

Twice the rifle barked, one bullet humming viciously past the ear of driver, the other tearing a ragged hole in a corner of the stage itself, then screeching diabolically as it whirled onward and upward, splitting the air with its battered front.

The driver ducked and crouched, but at the same moment kicked over his brake and jerked up his team, the leaders coming back upon his wheel-horses and throwing all into confusion for the moment.

"Steady, inside there!" cried the road-agent, as further warning. "Hold 'em

level, lads, and salivate the first fool who even tries to kick against the pricks!"

"Stop! Don't shoot!" cried a hasty voice from the interior. "There is a lady in here, and—for love of heaven don't shoot this way!"

"Play white and we'll treat you the same, gentlemen, all," assured the leader of the roughs. "Careful, Billy Johns!"

"Hain't I keerfulin' all I kin, bless ye?" half-whined the driver, yet dexterously recovering full control of his frightened team. "So-ho, lads! Come down, thar, you Dandy! Easy, Pete an' Patsy!"

"Take 'their heads a bi', one of you. The others hold 'em level."

"Thar's a leddy inside, boss," ventured the driver.

"I know it, Billy, and that's why we're measuring forth such a mild dose, don't you comprehend? And now—open that door, some one of you on the inside!"

A hasty hand flung wide the barrier, and Captain Crook stepped easily that way, speaking further:

"Tumble out, please. Play white on your side, and we'll treat you accordingly. Kick—well, that will mean matter for a funeral, sure!"

"We're making no fight, sir, because—don't shoot, I beg of you!"

The speaker was a man past middle age, whose face was scarcely that of cur or craven, in spite of the words he used while emerging from the stage; but that solicitude was explained in goodly measure a moment later, when he turned to give hand to a young and far from unlovely woman passenger.

Two other passengers, both men and citizens of Skeleton Camp, alighted from the coach, and were promptly "lined up" by the fellows assigned that particular duty in advance by their leader.

Captain Crook looked keenly at the first couple, and his eyes won a keener sparkle behind their cover as he took note of the younger and fairer face; but then, like a consistent road agent he turned his attention to the more material part of the hold-up.

"Pitch down the valuables, Billy Johns," he called out, sharply; but then made an amendment as though by afterthought: "Never mind, though. Pity to make you aid and comfort the enemy, Billy, so—up there, you fellows! Get both mail-sacks and treasure-box."

This was quickly accomplished, and leaving his fellows to rifle both receptacles as best they knew how, Captain Crook turned again to the human freight instead.

He gave a surly grunt as he apparently recognized the two citizens, then passed them by for the present with the gruff remark:

"Lean and hungry, both o' ye! If all game were of your caliber, boys, the road wouldn't be worth running, nor toll sufficient to buy beer and pretzels! Next time you want to borrow, if you don't own, understand?"

Without waiting for an answer he passed on, tipping hat slightly as he bowed before the veiled young lady, then spoke to her companion:

"Your name and business, stranger?"

"I haven't much money with me, sir, but that little is—"

"Can wait until asked for, surely," crisply interrupted the outlaw. "I asked who and what you are, to begin with; answer me, please."

"My name is Mallory Denport, and I am a lawyer by profession," the elderly gentleman hastened to utter. "I came out here—eh?"

For Captain Crook gave a sharp exclamation at that name, tossing Winchester across to the nearest agent, then thrusting right hand into bosom, to bring forth a crumpled sheet of blue paper, covered with print.

Turning this face toward the passenger, he pointed at heading, then at the name below before speaking in gruff, even harsh tones:

"This is your doing, then? This is your name, here?"

Mr. Mallory Denport hesitated a bit, more in surprise than in fright as it seemed, but then replied briskly enough:

"It is. My name, and my work. I put forth that notice, trusting by those methods to find one who has long been lost sight of. If you can tell me—"

Captain Crook lifted a hand, and the lawyer broke off, leaving his question incomplete. A brief silence, then the road agent spoke in the same gruff, seemingly forced tones:

"You're wasting your time, money and talents, old gentleman. You'll never find Caspar Austin out in these diggings, and if you should—"

"You know—surely you can give me some information concerning young Austin?" eagerly broke in the lawyer, leaning forward with hand clutching at an arm as he spoke.

But Captain Crook stepped back a pace, thus foiling the movement, at the same time adding in less harsh tones:

"I say you can't find Caspar Austin out here, and even if you should do just that, 'twould be so much the worse for all hands!"

"How so, pray? What do you mean by—worse?"

"Just what I tell you, sir. Go back, the quickest you known how. Go back and forget all about it, if you are wise!"

"But I can't, man!" impatiently cried the old lawyer, with a sharp gesture. "If you only knew what a vast amount is at stake, you would understand better what I mean by—can't!"

Captain Crook laughed shortly, like one who recognized a jest underlying all this seeming gravity, and at the same instant the lady passenger moved a bit closer to the man in mask, her color coming and going, as a keen eye might have seen in spite of the veil she wore.

"And you say that? You, a lawyer?" mocked the chief of road-agents.

"Why not, pray?" in testy tones. "What has the fact of my being a lawyer to do with it, sir?"

"Well, that depends on your metal, of course, but if I had the handling of the case—look you here, Mr. Mallory Denport," with gloved hand tapping an arm lightly as he added: "Just pledge your word of honor to give me one half of this blessed reward, and I'll supply all the proofs you can handle that Casper Austin is dead and decayed, long ago!"

The lawyer gave a start and cry at this speech, but ere he could say more, the young lady impulsively stepped forward, touching an arm as she gazed eagerly into those dark eyes behind the mask, then spoke in eager yet faltering tones:

"You are my Cousin Casper, sir?"

CHAPTER V.

CAPTAIN CROOK BEATS A RETREAT.

If Captain Crook felt any particular surprise at this unlooked for address, nothing in his actions betrayed as much, while his face was hidden from even the keenest of eyes.

A moment's delay, then one of his gloved hands moved to lightly cover the little member touching his arm; more like caress than capture, however, although the maiden shrunk a little at the touch.

Those fingers suddenly tightened upon hers, while the road-agent chief spoke in light, almost laughing accents:

"Don't I wish I had the right, little lady? 'Twould do any man proud to own up relationship with you; and cousin—better that tie of blood than being a brother!"

"But—surely—I thought—" faltered the young woman, visibly shrinking yet still with hand held prisoner by those muscular fingers.

Like one equally moved by impulse, Captain Crook bowed head and deftly moved the lower portion of his face-covering until his lips could brush the back of that little paw, then laughing

afresh as the maiden broke away with a little cry of confusion or of—was it anger?

"Better cousin than brother, if only for the delightful hopes one might then indulge in, but—better not!" with a change in both voice and manner as complete as it was abrupt. "For I'm a bad egg; most decidedly a bad egg, young lady, and would be mighty little credit to any well-ordered family."

Seemingly forgetful of all else, Mallory Denport was watching and listening like one upon whom conviction was rapidly growing. And now, as Captain Crook released that hand to draw back a bit, the lawyer moved forward, hand coming forth and voice slightly tremulous as he spoke:

"Sir, I believe—surely Milly is right; you are Caspar Austin?"

"Milly?" echoed the road-agent. "Milly what?"

"Milly Blythe, my ward and Caspar's cousin. If you are—"

"But I'm not, so where's the 'use'?" almost gruffly interposed Captain Crook with an impatient gesture.

"You're not? Then why—you act like—"

"Merely to see what other idiots this queer world can turn out, my dear fellow," mockingly cried the outlaw.

Again the young woman was moved by strong impulse, and again her little hand caught hold of an arm while its mate pushed back the veil which had until now partially obscured her beauty; for beauty Milly Blythe surely was, as Captain Crook could now see for himself.

"Cousin—surely you are my cousin, sir?"

Again the road-agent faltered, seemingly touched by tone, look or manner. He glanced quickly around, as though to note just how each other individual was occupied, then shifted his position so as to turn his back upon them all save Miss Blythe.

"Will nothing less convince you, my dear girl?" he said, at the same time lifting his mask and affording a full yet fleeting view of his face.

That face was fairly masked by a heavy growth of brown beard, yet enough could be seen to show the road-agent had no need of hiding his features through lack of manly beauty, or facial deformity.

That exposure was brief-lived, then he bent swiftly forward and downward, dropping a kiss full upon those red, slightly parted lips, giving a little laugh of easy mockery as the maiden shrunk away with a low cry.

Captain Crook made no attempt to check that recoil, letting his own disguise fall into place once more, then speaking lightly:

"A foretaste of heaven, if I never again rise above the level of purgatory! So much for courtesy, and now for business!"

"Although you mayn't think it, judging merely by what you have seen and heard, pilgrims all, nevertheless the facts remain: we're toll-takers by profession, and this is one of our busy days."

"'Tis said in Holy Writ that the Lord loves a cheerful giver, and so do we—which makes it more binding! Now—toll, please!"

The change was almost too abrupt for ready comprehension, and naturally the response was a bit sluggish.

So Captain Crook evidently thought, for his right hand dropped to butt of pistol as he repeated:

"Toll, please! Shell out, gentlemen, or—will you be shelled instead?"

The road-agent gave a curt nod to one of his henchmen, adding:

"Pass around the hat, deacon. They're just hungry to donate their mite to the heathen, and we are—what's the matter with you?"

One of the road-agents gave a sharp exclamation just then, pointing upward where the gray rocks overlooked the stage-road, hastily speaking as he did this:

"Sure, boss, I done ketched a glimpse of—"

"Of what, you fool?" harshly demanded Captain Crook as the knave faltered in place of finishing his sentence.

A hand was dashed swiftly across eyes for another and clearer look, then the fellow mumbled, like one half-bewildered:

"Ef I didn't think—I done sighted a face up yender, boss, or I'm a howlin' liar!"

"Bah!" exploded the leader after a keen look in the direction indicated without discovering aught more dangerous than rocks or bushes. "You were born that way, and have been growing worse ever since. A face, is it? Whose face, you gawk?"

"A face—jest a face, boss, which was—right thar by the big rock which hes a corner knocked off like it mought be—hope may die ef I didn't, now!"

"Bah! If you were blessed with brains enough, bully, you'd turn crazy. As it is, you're no good save to eat the rations of a better man, and to do nightmare howling on extra occasions."

With a surly growl the road-agent slunk away, cowed if not wholly convinced, while his imperious master turned again to the passengers in line, lightly speaking:

"I don't know if you tipped the wink for my pretty jack-in-the-box yonder to chip in, gentlemen, but if so you'll have trouble for your pains, and nothing better."

"Sorry to insist, but this is the way I make my living. Money keeps the old mare in motion, and helps our wheels turn 'round. So—for the last time of asking: pay toll or fare mighty sight worse!"

The fellow, with an open-mouthed sack stepped forward, and the hold-up once more took its natural course, all moving like clockwork.

Although Captain Crook had spoken in smooth, almost bland accents, he clearly meant business, pure and simple. With odds so heavy against them, resistance would be worse than useless, and a man might better lose his money than his brains.

So the passengers evidently reasoned, for they showed no obstinacy, each in turn producing his little belongings with what grace might be called to the front.

"Just the clean, cold cash, gentlemen," directed Captain Crook from his post of observation, taking keen note of each move being made. "We are not in the petty pawnbroking line, bear in mind, and our transactions are conducted upon a cash basis. Nothing but money, but the more of that you shell out, the heartier will be our blessings at parting company."

That rifling process did not take long, so far as the two citizens of Skeleton Camp were concerned.

If they had gone through the same process on a former occasion, they acted like it, meekly producing what little coin they were blessed with, yielding it up with smothered sighs, then returning rejected trifles to their original resting-places.

The agent who served as deacon hesitated perceptibly as he moved nearer Mallory Denport, turning mask toward his chieftain in mute inquiry as he did so.

"All right, my lad; business is business, and even a fictitious claim of relationship can't be permitted to interfere with the regular course of proceedings. Must trouble you, old gentleman!"

"I'd rather the demand came from any other man living, though!" almost passionately cried the old lawyer, drawing forth a reasonably plump wallet and opening it with trembling fingers.

"Which means Casper Austin, not Captain Crook," coolly amended the man in mask, then adding more brusquely: "That's all right, pardner. Never mind about holding back the giblets: just turn it over in a lump and we'll destroy what we can't make better use of."

"But, sir, I have a paper or two here which I wish to save," hastily cried the lawyer, drawing back as the "deacon" made a grab for his purse. "As for the little money I carry, you're welcome to all that."

"How kind—how exceedingly generous of you, my dear sir!" mocked Captain Crook, then swiftly changing tone for one of harsh command: "Pony up, you gray-headed fool! I've already wasted too much time with you, and from now on, I'll talk naked business. Fork over, I say, or I'll blow—"

Again a sharp cry of warning from one of the road-agents less busy, and this time the cause showed for itself, as Captain Crook swiftly recognized.

Down the road, just rounding the bend which had already played an important part in that day's work, came three men on foot, recognizable at a single glance as prospectors.

That discovery was mutual, and the trio stopped short, evidently recognizing a hold-up from the face of things, and instinctively gripping guns as they stared.

"Steady, lads!" cried Captain Crook as his men seemed cast into confusion by this sight. "Nothing to worry over, even if no profit in sight. They'll never kick nor prick, unless we—"

"But here's a party who will do both, my black-a-vised gentleman!"

Sharp and distinct came the call from up among the gray rocks over-looking the stage-road, and the outlaw who had given the earlier alarm broke forth with a howl of fierce triumph.

"I knowed it! I did glimpse a face, right yender! I did—"

And so did Captain Crook, right then and there; a face which he had no difficulty in recognizing as that of the Sport at Large, to whom he already owed such a heavy debt of—hardly gratitude, either!

Sagebrush Sandy it was, looking down upon the road and its startled occupants over a lightly held revolver, while its mate hung in his left hand, ready to come into play at need, so one would have said.

And so another thought it ought, since Arnold Eades clutched the weapon and jerked it out of that careless grip, giving a fierce cry as he did so.

"Ye devils! Bury me alive, will ye? Oh, but I'll—"

But he didn't, just then!

He was drawing the gun down upon Captain Crook, readily recognizable by both shape and garb, when his footing seemed to betray the detective, who came tumbling in awkward manner over the boulder, bouncing from another, to drop lower, then roll fairly into the beaten road itself.

The revolver fell far from his unnerved fingers, exploding as it struck the stones, but the lead whistled harmlessly through space.

The road-agents were thrown into greater confusion by this fresh surprise, but Captain Crook still kept his head, sternly crying aloud:

"Steady, lads! We've got a shirt-tail grip if we care to hold fast, but—is it worth while?"

"Sorry to spoil sport, gentlemen, but—rack out o' that!" warningly cried the Sport at Large from his stronghold. "Skip, I say, or pay the full penalty!"

He added a cheer for sake of the prospectors whom he likewise saw, yonder, then spoiled a cartridge without adding to his record.

A single swift look told Captain Crook that both mail-bags and treasure-box had been fairly rifled by his busy men, and that apparently helped his decision, for he sprang backward as he cried out:

"See you later, Sagebrush Sandy! And gentlemen, until we meet again! Be good you, to yourself, Daddy Denport, and—sweet dreams be thine, my angelic cousin—ha! ha! ha!"

Laughing in tune with his barking forty-four the reckless toll-taker backed away, now sending a blue whistler up

yonder rocks, then taking a snap-shot or two at the still irresolute prospectors down the road.

As the road-agents went, Sagebrush Sandy came, swinging himself over the rocks where his recent companion had tumbled so awkwardly, paying no particular attention to Arnold Eades who was still lying there in a disordered and dusty heap, like one dead or insensible.

The enemy were not sparing of their ammunition, Captain Crook leading in that respect, yet—was it purely chance?—hardly a shot was wasted upon the Sport at Large, all others being turned toward yonder rough-garbed miners!

Sage struck the road-level on his feet, laughing easily as he tipped hat in recognition of the fair sex, bowing gracefully as he caught a fair view of Milly's more than fair face.

On her side, the young woman betrayed a curious agitation, first shrinking from that newcomer, but then, as his hat lifted, catching her breath sharply and involuntarily moving his way the next moment.

"Your servant, all! Sorry I couldn't get on deck any earlier, but maybe we can—" began Sagebrush Sandy, only to break off in real or admirably feigned surprise as Milly Blythe uttered a low, agitated cry, springing forward to clasp both hands on an arm as she gazed eagerly into his sun-bronzed face.

"What is the matter, ma'am?" asked the Sport at Large, wonder in face and in tones. "Are you hurt? Or—what's gone wrong, anyway?"

CHAPTER VI.

SAGEBRUSH SANDY TAKES CHARGE.

Whether purposely or not, the Sport at Large shook off that clinging clasp, both recoiling a bit as through involuntary repulsion.

"Milly, dear!" spoke Mallory Denport, but if the girl heard she did not heed, gazing at that bronzed face like one fascinated for the moment.

"Jasper—surely it is—you are—Jasper?" she faltered, indistinctly through powerful emotion, hands clasping nervously as she again took a step that way.

At the same instant the sport stepped back, a thoroughly puzzled expression resting upon his face as he slightly shook his head.

More than the old lawyer was looking interestedly at this odd bit of by-play.

Arnold Eades rallied from his ugly tumble, scrambling to his feet while the sport was making his first address, and now was staring at his recent companion with eyes that fairly burned; eyes full of fierce suspicion or deadly hatred one would have said.

And as he stared his athletic figure crouched as for a leap, while right hand fumbled at his hip as though seeking the weapon which should but was no longer resting there!

As for the Sport at Large, just then he had eyes and thoughts for this strangely acting madden alone, from whose lips followed the words:

"Jasper—oh, Jasper! don't you know me? Don't you know Milly?"

Naturally enough all this consumed time, and the road-agents had taken horse and ridden away at full speed, while the prospectors came forward all the more briskly for that fact.

One of the trio took note of that wolfish stare and ominous crouching, and acted accordingly.

Tapping an arm he muttered in grim tones of warning:

"Ye look like ye could eat him, stranger, but he'd make a mighty tough meal fer even a better man then you dast fer to be!"

"I don't—what it is?"

"Jest a fair word in a friendly way, pardner," coolly answered the miner, as Eades caught breath sharply and drew himself more nearly erect. "Play white an' ye'll be treated a'cordin'. Take snap-judgment onto the sport an' you'll—waal, a hint is plenty, 'thout the kick: eh?"

The detective shook himself together,

like a man just roused from an unpleasant nightmare, forcing a wan smile as he met the keen gaze of Sagebrush Sandy, who had turned face that way as though warned by pure instinct of brewing danger.

"It is—I'm all right—now," Eades mumbled, looking around as though for something lost in that headlong plunge from rocks to road-bed. "Reckon it knocked my wits endways, but now—all right, I tell you stranger!"

Not until then did the sport make any sort of response to the pitiful plea of Milly Blythe, although her eyes were still fixed upon his face with a half-frightened, wholly bewildered light in their depths.

"I didn't just catch—you wanted something, ma'am?" coolly asked the sport, touching the brim of the hat which had so recently known another owner.

"Jasper—don't you know me?" faintly repeated the maiden, but now shrinking back rather than leaning forward, as doubt crept into her mind, and memory seemed to grow weaker and weaker.

Sagebrush Sandy gazed steadily into that face, now flushing, now turning paler as emotions varied. Then he drew a long breath, shaking his head in reluctant negation before speaking:

"Sorry, ma'am, ever so much, but—I can't come in! Your bluff oversizes me, you see? I haven't even Paddy's flush, for my cards are five sorts, and every one of a different color!"

"But—surely—that face!"

"Be calm, little girl," said Mallory Denport, coming to the rescue and lending his ward the support she plainly needed, just then. "This gentleman is—is not—"

"I know—how could I ever mistake his face?" brokenly murmured the maiden, apparently forgetful of all other surroundings, just then. "I saw him! I know—you surely will not deny me, Jasper?"

Sagebrush Sandy frowned a bit as those tear-dimmed eyes turned his way again, but his head shook from side to side slowly, then he spoke:

"Sorry, ma'am, but what else can I do? I'm not Jasper this nor Jasper that, but plain, everyday Alexander Sage, better known in these parts, perhaps, as Sagebrush Sandy, the Sport at Large."

Milly Blythe shrunk back, shivering like one under a sudden chill, and turning away, the sport assumed charge of affairs, talking briskly to Billy Johns, the driver, and to the trio of prospectors, all of whom he seemed to recognize even if they were not bosom friends.

Nothing was to be seen or heard of the road-agents, and though they had beaten a retreat in the direction of Skeleton Camp, sticking to the road itself until fairly out of sight, it was hardly probable that any further trouble was to be expected from that source.

"They made a clean sweep, an' that's what's the matter!" sighed the worthy driver as Sagebrush Sandy stopped to inspect the rifled bags and box, one shattered and the others slashed wide open by keen knives.

"Well, neither Uncle Sam nor the Express Company can fault you, old man," consolingly uttered the Sport as he gathered up the scattered mail and tucked it inside the pouches, then lifted them up for Johns to further secure. "It's them and Captain Crook for it, now."

Having done this much, Sagebrush Sandy turned back to the passengers who were each occupied after his own fashion: two growling over their losses, and cursing the luck that didn't fetch help before instead of after their rifling.

Miss Blythe had re-entered the stage, and was to be seen leaning back in a corner, veil drawn closely and face hidden from view for the moment.

Mallory Denport was standing near the open door, and to him the Sport at Large spoke, in guarded tones, after a brief glance at the young lady within.

"I reckon we'd better be pulling out for the camp, stranger. And—one word

of warning for your private ear, please," he added in still lower tones.

The old lawyer was keenly scanning that bluffly handsome visage, a troubled light in his little gray eyes, the bony fingers of one hand plucking at the gray imperial which, added to the trimly kept mustache, gave a decidedly military look to his face.

Denport yielded to that gentle touch, and when at a safe distance from that stage-door, Sage spoke further:

"Maybe it isn't necessary, stranger, but—well, you're new to these parts, I take it, and Captain Crook is mighty bad medicine: mighty bad!"

"He has gone, and surely will not trouble us further?"

"Not just now, perhaps, but I'd hate to swear to that much, even," in serious tones. "One thing you can set down for a solid fact: the captain has took a powerful fancy to your daughter, yonder, and—"

"My ward, do you mean, sir?"

"Your—what?"

"My ward, Miss Blythe."

"Then—well, sir, I took her for your living daughter, and that's a solid fact! And she's your ward, eh?"

"Surely you know that, Jasper?"

"What? You, too?" exclaimed the Sport at Large, with a wry grimace at sound of that name. "If any more come at me with the same stuff, I'll fancy this outfit is an asylum broken loose: yes, I just will, now!"

"Then you are not—in one word, are you Jasper Austin?"

"In three words: I am not!" positively declared the Sport at Large, nodding head at each word as it crossed his lips. "Is that plain enough for your comprehension, sir, or—shall I hunt up a Bible to kiss?"

Mallory Denport drew a long, full breath as he gazed keenly into those bright brown eyes, then slowly shook his head, but like one convinced sorely against his will.

"Of course, if you talk like that—"

"I'd make it still more forcible if I only knew how, pardner," the Sport came again, yet with just the ghost of a smile dawning about his mustached lips. "Not that I'd object to the associations, if I only thought I could live up to them. But—well, business is business, and this is folly, so—mind, stranger: Captain Crook seldom lets go a hold once taken, and he'll try for another chat with your ward, or I'm 'way off in my guess."

"Then you know him, sir?" eagerly asked the old lawyer.

"I know of him—yes."

"Is he—was he ever called Caspar Austin?"

"Good Lord!" fairly exploded the Sport, flinging up his hands, then fetching them down to cover his ears as he turned hastily away from the startled if not scandalized man of law.

To come face to face with Arnold Eades, face bruised and marked in spots with blood, hands ditto, only worse, while garments would have looked more in place on scarecrow in field than where they then were, all thanks to the dangerous tumble he had taken.

The detective forced a grim smile as the Sport looked him over with a broad grin, then slowly uttered:

"I'm not so positive I don't owe it all to you, too, Mr. Sage."

"How so, pray?"

"Didn't you shove me over that rock on purpose?"

"Did I—oh, come now, pardner; what makes you think anything so abominably silly as that?" expostulated Sagebrush Sandy.

"Well, I honestly did think that way: but, if you deny it, all—"

"Of course, I deny it all. Why should I play you such a trick?"

"Well, that was what bothered me more than all the rest," drily admitted the detective, turning away as though to enter the stage.

There was an odd twinkle visible for a

moment or two in the brown eyes which followed his movements, but then Sagebrush Sandy called out to the masculine members of the company:

"All aboard, gentlemen? And that counts in the newcomers as well as the regulars, for—who's saying?—Captain Crook may jump us again, and he'll be hungry for a full meal when he jump ag'in."

"Ef I reckoned like that, hyar's one as'd stick to shanks' mar'," frankly admitted one of the prospectors.

"Oh, catch on, Tommy; you're heap sight better stuff than shows on the outside, and if there is to be a regular fight, I want you to hide behind," airily retorted the Sport, climbing nimbly up to a seat on the box beside Billy Johns.

One of the prospectors did the same thing, his mates preferring seats inside, where Arnold Eades likewise went, for reasons of his own, but which were soon after dimly shadowed forth.

After the stage was fairly in motion, rolling briskly on toward Skeleton Camp, Eades entered into conversation with Mallory Denport, finding no difficulty in doing so, thanks to the subject-matter offered by their recent experience.

But then he deftly changed the subject, speaking of the poster which Captain Crook had betrayed so strong an interest in, striving the best he knew how to learn something more definite.

Foiled in that respect, he spoke of the Sport at Large, trying to learn just how far Denport had recognized him as another personage, or one passing under a disguise.

Very little satisfaction did he gain, however, for the old lawyer, quickly catching the drift of that veiled curiosity, closed up like a clam, so far as information was concerned.

For several miles nearly all of the party now aboard the stage kept a keen lookout for Captain Crook and his toughs, by no means certain that the notorious toll-taker would not make another and less merciful swoop, if only to pay back the little surprise he had himself suffered.

But nothing of the sort took place, and while the sun hid his glowing face far down the west, Billy's pet team kicked the miles rapidly behind them, drawing nearer to Skeleton Camp at a more than fair gait, although all idea of making schedule time had long since been abandoned.

Of that little company, none were so gay and light-hearted as Sagebrush Sandy; for, when talking played out, he fell to singing right merrily, nor were his clear, mellow notes anything to feel ashamed of, either.

The twilight was fairly falling when the stage finally rolled into Skeleton Camp and Billy Johns drew rein in front of the post office, which was always the first halting-place, according to rule.

Here the door opened and the passengers crowded out, Mallory Denport emerging just as Sagebrush Sandy sprang from his perch upon the driver's box, speaking quickly:

"Perhaps you'd better wait a bit, sir, and let Billy tool you around to the hashery, don't you reckon?"

"There is a good hotel, then?"

"From fair to middling, sir; but the best a place like the camp can well be expected to supply. I stop there when I'm at home, and I reckon you can't do any better than to take the same shelter. Shall I tell Billy to move on, then?"

"If you will be so kind—yes," decided the lawyer, drawing back and settling again in the seat beside his ward, while Sandy called out:

"Take us to the Grand Central, Billy, my beauty! Lively, too, old man!"

Johns obeyed, willing enough to dodge the task of explaining how his mail came to be so badly injured; and as they left the stage, Denport spoke hurriedly to the sport:

"I must see you again, on important business, Mr. Austin!"

"Very well, sir," answered Sage, then turned to see Arnold Eades at his shoulder, eyes glowing and face full of poorly disguised interest.

CHAPTER VII.

SAGEBRUSH SANDY WANTS TO KNOW.

The recent arrivals were just a trifle late for supper, but mine host of the Grand Central proved himself equal to the occasion, and no man was permitted to go hungry who saw fit to meet his charges.

As a regular guest, of course the Sport at Large felt entirely at home, and, as a matter of common politeness, Sandy looked after his newly formed acquaintances, being early at the dining-room and selecting a table where they might be fairly well screened from any too-curious eyes, should such prove to be their liking.

But a goodly portion of this trouble went for naught, since Mallory Denport entered the long apartment without company, and as the sport naturally looked the surprise he felt, the old lawyer briefly explained in undertones that, owing to the unusual excitement, she had that afternoon experienced, Miss Blythe would take bite and sup in her own chamber.

"'Twas a pretty rough deal, and that's a fact," Sagebrush Sandy admitted, placing a chair for the elderly gentleman, giving Arnold Eades a crisp little nod of recognition as he slipped into another at the same table. "Still, I trust the young lady is but temporarily disposed?"

"Nothing serious, thank you," with a stiff little bow as the proffered seat was accepted. "Miss Blythe will be fairly herself by morning, Mr.—ah—ahem!"

"Sage—Alexander Sage, for short," smoothly uttered the sport, taking a place himself and looking around for the slow-coming waiter. "Get a hustle on you, Johnny, please. These gentlemen are sharp-set, while for myself—well, if you hadn't taken your annual bath six months ago, I'm not certain I wouldn't start with chewing you for a beginning!"

With Arnold Eades so close at hand, ears as keen as his eyes, and all four on the full alert, there was precious little opportunity for more than the idlest of talk, and as all hands really seemed unusually hungry, but very little of even that passed across the table.

Mallory Denport did begin something about an interview, but broke off abruptly as Sagebrush Sandy brought heel sharply down upon a pet corn beneath the table, and the detective was but little wiser when he left than when he came.

A better chance came while leaving the dining-room, however, and the man of law promptly improved it, speaking hastily:

"Where can I see you, Mr. Austin, for a few words in privacy?"

"Not here. Every one of these four walls has a dozen ears, and I'd not trust any one of them."

"Where else, then?"

"Just keep one eye on me, and I'll lead the way. Button lip and don't chin-chin to any other, though. Just look and wait."

Right or wrong, Sagebrush Sandy felt strongly suspicious of the man whom he had rescued from a living grave that day, and his next few minutes were devoted to throwing Arnold Eades fairly off the scent.

That proved to be less difficult than he at first expected. In fact, Eades seemed to play for his hand, and, outwardly, at least, the farmer-like stranger seemed sluggish and worn out by his day's work, fairly nodding as he moved heavily about.

Satisfied at length that he had shaken off the fellow in fact, Sagebrush Sandy gave Mallory Denport the signal for which he was impatiently watching, then led the way with back turned toward the

hotel and face toward the by no means distant hills.

Although doing a fine business after a rough-and-ready fashion, by night as well as by day, Skeleton Camp covered neither a vast amount of ground nor was brilliantly lighted up, even during its busiest hours.

It was by no means a difficult matter for Sagebrush Sandy to pick his way so as to avoid meeting up with any too curious acquaintance, and in the course of a very few minutes he turned to face the lawyer, out in the open, with rocks lying around them, and twinkling stars affording light sufficient for reading faces fairly well.

"Well, my friend, here we are, and now for the all-important question—what are you going to do about it?"

Mallory Denport reached forth to rest a hand upon one of those broad shoulders, gazing intently into the face above for a few moments, then speaking with troubled gravity:

"Why do you deny your name and identity, Austin?"

"Who said I was denying either, pray?"

"Common sense, if nothing else. Milly knew you at a single glance, and so did I after taking a second look. You are—"

"Sagebrush Sandy, of course."

"Jasper Austin, nephew to Warren Clutter, and less than two years ago actually engaged in marriage—"

"Oh, I say!" hastily expostulated the Sport, shaking both hand and head.

"I am saying it, sir, and I'll keep on saying it until—how can you even pretend to deny the truth, sir?"

"Isn't it enough to cram a name and identity all over a poor devil, without ramming a wife down his throat? And—next thing 'twill be a ready-made family of—holy sacrifice!"

Sagebrush Sandy seemed fairly horrified by that bare idea, but Mr. Denport paid very little attention to those mock heroics. More firmly than ever he believed this young man was playing a part, and he felt in duty bound to frustrate that same ambition.

"Nonsense, Jasper! You know what I mean. You were to marry Milly—"

"I was? Oh, I say, now!"

"You dare not look me squarely in the eye and deny it, Jasper Austin. You dare not, I repeat!"

Mallory Denport spoke with almost fierce decision, and the person he thus addressed seemed to hesitate for the first time.

A brief silence; then the Sport at Large spoke again, more coolly than ever, as it seemed on the surface.

"You appear to know all about it, sir. Who and what am I, then?"

"Jasper Austin, I repeat, nephew to Warren Clutter, who died a rich man, leaving behind him a fortune of nearly two million dollars in money or in money's worth."

"And I'm supposed to be his sole heir?" quickly cut in the Sport, seeming to win a new interest in the matter, judging from face, voice, and manner. "Is that the way the cat jumps?"

"You forget your twin brother, Jasper."

"My—what?"

"Your twin, Caspar, of course."

"Heavenly grandpap!" again exploded the Sport at Large, hands flying up the better to express his amazement. "Name, kindred, cousin, betrothed, a fortune—and now a twin cherubim to play cap-sheaf! Glory to the lamb, what comes next?"

Denport frowned and flung out a hand in strong irritation at what he deemed worse than child's play.

"Nonsense, man! Why do you pretend—"

"Steady!" cut in Sage, unceremoniously. "You want to pretend, rather, and I'm doing the contrary act."

"So contrary to truth that it's growing worse than monotonous," the lawyer declared, sharply.

"That's all right, coming from the source it does," gravely spoke the other. "A fellow can overlook in an old gentleman what would be fighting talk in one nearer his own age."

"I didn't mean any insult, dear boy, but why will you keep on denying your identity, now that we are out here alone, where no other ears can take advantage of any such admission? And—why should you fear to take the whole world into your confidence, for that matter? If it had been Caspar, now, I could at least partly comprehend why he should fight a little shy, but you—no!"

"Thank you, if thanks are due, Mr. Denport," smoothly spoke the younger man. "As you say, there's no reason in the wide world why I should pretend, out here by our lonesome; and that's exactly why I'm flinging the truth at you in great chunks!"

"I am Alexander Sage, and nobody else. To the best of my knowledge and belief I never was anybody else, either!"

"But—Milly recognized you, Jasper!"

"And nothing would please me better than to jump right into the situation you hinted at, only a bit ago, don't you know?" swiftly spoke the younger man, with a fleeting smile, as he looked into those sorely puzzled eyes. "The young lady is a good-looker from way back, and—but that's on the side, and hardly white talk, either!"

"I really can't make you out, Jasper!"

"And yet you ask me to try that same, is it? All right, if you can show me fair wages in the little comedy, Mr. Denport. If I'm to play the heir to that same healthy fortune, what sort of rake-off will I get? And how do you expect to dispose of the real heir, should he unfortunately happen to turn up at the wrong moment? Kill him?"

"Sir? Do you mean to insult me?"

"Don't you begin to think it, sir," came the quick assurance. "Just business, pure and simple, so far as I am concerned. If I'm to play Jasper Austin, of course I ought to know what my pay is to be. And so—will you promulgate further, dear sir?"

That thinly veiled sneer served to nerve the lawyer rather than the contrary, and making no further attempt to gloss over the point at issue, he spoke on in rapid yet clear tones.

"Listen, then, since you will play ignorant if not innocent. There were twin brothers born, to be named Caspar and Jasper, of parents named Austin."

"From earliest infancy these twins bore a truly remarkable resemblance to each other, physically speaking, but as they grew older a startling difference in nature became evident to all who knew them."

"One was a fairly good lad, just such as you might pick up in almost any family, but his twin was just the contrary; he seemed possessed of the devil, and to grow worse as he grew older."

"And I'm the black sheep, of course?" asked Sandy, with a feigned sigh of regret for lost opportunities.

"You know better than that, Jasper," sharply reproved the lawyer. "Why will you force me to repeat all this, when a single admission from your lips would save both time and chatter?"

"Well, my dear sir, oughtn't I to coach up in my part?" innocently asked the Sport at Large. "It isn't an every-day occurrence that a poor devil like myself sees a chance to slip into a fortune, and I'd hate most mightily to slip up on it through pure carelessness. And so—go on with your dictionary talk, please!"

"Since you will have it so—listen a bit further, then," sternly spoke the elder man, plainly irritated to the verge of endurance.

"Caspar Austin was the devil-infected twin, and he went on from bad to worse, wholly beyond the control of his parents, who were fortunate in dying early, to my notion."

"Pretty tough, that!" muttered the Sport, but without betraying any filial emotion, so far as the keen-eyed law-

yer could detect. "And I've got to own that fellow as a brother, is it?"

"You surely know that much—but I'll finish, since I've begun. Caspar went from bad to worse, finally fleeing from justice and making good his escape in spite of all the powers of law and justice."

"His guilt seemed beyond doubt, yet you—his twin-brother—refused to credit even such positive evidence, and took a solemn oath that he would never give over until his brother was found and brought back, to prove his complete innocence in the face of all the world."

"And I am not Caspar? I'm not the black sheep of the family, you say?" asked the Sport at Large, just a bit more seriously.

"Of course not, since you are Jasper Austin. And the young lady whom you cruelly rebuffed this afternoon—"

"Go on, please."

"Is your cousin, whom you used to call your little wife?"

CHAPTER VIII.

WARREN CLUTTER'S QUEER WILL.

Mallory Denport spoke as though he counted on making a point with this declaration, but if so he forgot how greatly its force must have been discounted by what had gone before.

Still, the sport seemed to betray a deeper interest in this fresh portion than in anything which had so far come up, and while still sorely perplexed to account for that strange aversion to admit the truth, Mr. Denport felt a certain degree of encouragement.

"Well, well, now, matters aren't nearly so bad as I fancied," frankly admitted Alexander, with a curt nod of approval. "The good little boy instead of the evil one. And with sense enough to pick out a remarkably pretty—ahem!"

"You've altered greatly, Jasper, since leaving us, and all for the worse at that," bluntly declared the lawyer. "If there was any other way out of the tangle—but there isn't, that I can see—worse luck!"

"I'd call it better luck, since I'm to enter into a fortune which—of what magnitude, please?"

"How can you claim even a share, when you flatly deny your identity with Jasper Austin, one of the missing heirs?" sharply asked the lawyer.

"Oh, if that's the only obstacle, just see me stride clear over it," lightly chuckled Sandy. "I'm Jasper Austin. I had a twin brother, who was very, very bad, while I was a little angel on ten wheels! And I had a little—but that's too far over the line, old friend!"

Mallory Denport moved a bit closer, thin hands resting lightly upon those shoulders, turning that face to let the starlight fall more fairly upon it, gazing into face and eyes like one striving to read the whole truth in spite of mask or of mockery.

Sagebrush Sandy withstood this ordeal to perfection, if keeping up that puzzling mystery was any object. Mr. Denport drew back with a faint sigh, shaking his head like one at a loss.

But then he rallied, speaking in calmer tones:

"All right. I'll take you at your own estimate, young man. Whether Milly was right or wrong can make but little difference, since what I'm going to tell you can hardly be called a secret."

"Cut loose, then. I'm fond of listening, and that's no lie."

"If you are what you pretend, it cuts no particular figure for just what manner of crime Caspar Austin was outlawed. If what I still firmly believe, you surely know what he did, and how he did it."

"All right. Play I knew it all," was the easy remark. "If necessary to grow wiser in days to come, I can readily look up the records."

"You refused to credit the guilt of your twin brother. You were absent from home at the time, and when you hurried back, 'twas too late to be of service."

Caspar had fled, and no man could say whither."

"Good boy, Caspar!"

"There was at least one other who held as firm faith as yourself in Caspar's innocence—"

"The young lady, of course?" quickly cut in the Sport at Large.

"No, although Milly tried hard to think—"

"Yourself, then, sir?"

"No, again. I tried hard, but the evidence was far too convincing for any unprejudiced mind to hold such a belief," soberly said the old lawyer, with a slight gesture. "Sorry as I am to say as much, the truth remains the same: 'twas a cold-blooded murder, and Caspar Austin was the guilty person!"

Sagebrush Sandy moved slightly, but that may have been caused by any other emotion, though Mallory Denport interpreted it in favor of his own theory.

"You forced me to speak so plainly, Jasper, else I might have passed this portion by without comment," he said, half apologetically, half reproachfully; but the Sport surely was case-hardened, for he easily spoke:

"Never mind that, dear fellow, but go on with your pretty talk!"

Denport rallied quickly, speaking on as invited.

"I said there was one other person who held firm belief in the full and complete innocence of your twin, Jasper, and that other was old Mr. Clutter, your uncle."

"The wealthy codger, eh? Well, that was kind of him, anyway," genially quoth the Sport at Large.

"And failing to make that innocence clear to all the rest of the world in his own lifetime, Warren Clutter did all he could to emphasize his faith after death claimed his body," added the lawyer.

"As I said, he died possessed of a vast fortune, nearly one-half in Government bonds, and the remainder in profitable real estate."

"Smart old uncle, for a fact! Wish I might give him thanks for it all, but—well, that might be difficult, not knowing just what direction he was heading in when—ahem!"

Clumsy rallery, it seemed, and Mallory Denport frowned even while still further convinced that this was one of the missing heirs.

"If I really thought you were one-half as bad as you are seeking to make me believe, young man, I'd stop short off, and never speak another word to you on this or any other subject," he declared, sternly.

"Don't, dear sir! I'll be good. But—well, don't you know, when Caspar was tarred so blackly, I reckon a few odd drops from the brush must have scattered across to Jasper! And so—well, I'm buttoned up!"

"Listen, then, or I'll break off and leave you to come to your own senses as you may see fit. And—about Warren Clutter."

"He gave me his instructions, and I made out his will with my own hand, for reasons which I held were good and justifiable. Not that I distrusted my clerks, you understand, but simply because—"

"I do understand, sir, so you may pass on," coolly cut in Sandy.

"In that will Warren Clutter emphasized his faith in his nephew, for he left his fortune to the twin brothers, first naming Caspar. That was natural enough, perhaps, since Caspar was an hour or more the eldest of the pair."

"Lucky we don't follow the English plan, isn't it?"

"No chaffing, please. Apart from that mention, and a few words of belief in Caspar's freedom from guilt, Warren Clutter left you twins on a perfect level, so far as his fortune was concerned."

"You were to share and share alike, but the property was to remain intact until Caspar came home—"

"What's that?" almost harshly demanded Sandy.

"As I'm telling you, sir," curtly retorted the man of law. "The entire fortune was not to be disturbed on any pretense so long as Caspar remained a fugitive, unless proof positive of his death should come to light, in which case—"

"Steady, please; let's understand it all as we go along. While Caspar was missing, Jasper was not to be any better off for all that heap of money?"

"Not one penny, and that is why—"

"Wait. But if Casper was proven guilty?"

"His uncle refused to admit even the possibility of that. He took it for granted that Caspar was the victim of circumstances and evil associations, not that he had committed any actual crime."

"The fortune was to remain as invested, until one of two things happened: Caspar's home-coming or his death being proven past all doubt."

"In the latter case?"

"Then the entire fortune was to revert to his twin-brother, Jasper Austin, who was earnestly adjured to marry Milly Blythe, his second cousin, who is—"

Sagebrush Sandy drew a long and audible breath at this, making an impulsive gesture as he did so. Mallory Denport ceased speaking, and the Sport at Large broke forth with the words:

"You seem determined to tempt me out of the straight and narrow path, stranger; yes, you do, now!"

Sandy laughed oddly, and Mr. Denport spoke sharply:

"What am I to understand by that, sir?"

"Well, judging from the little I've already seen, my dear sir, I'd be more than willing to accept such a bride, even without dot or dowry! But when such a heap o' ducats are added—better than good enough!"

Mallory Denport lifted a clenched hand in anger, as though he felt sorely tempted to strike those mocking lips, but he contented himself with saying:

"Are you all brute, Jasper Austin? Are you all brute, or merely a fool? If neither—"

That sentence was never finished, for just then Sagebrush Sandy gave a low, fierce cry, grasping the lawyer and whirling him swiftly aside, as though in vicious enmity; but at the same instant a gun or revolver exploded from no great distance, its ruddy glare briefly lighting up a portion of the gray rocks which lay in such plentiful confusion.

"Look out or—easy, man alive!" cried the Sport, trying to fling the lawyer clear in order to draw his own gun for swift use.

But Denport, fancying that this was a brutal attack upon his life, and being nothing of cur or craven, grappled fiercely with the younger man, striving to trip and throw him like an old wrestler.

Sagebrush Sandy was a bad man to tackle after any such fashion, and quickly broke away, whirling Denport dizzily aside, then jerking forth his pistol and leaping toward the point of rocks from whence had come that treacherous shot.

But a few yards had to be covered, and those brown eyes were keen as the best, yet Sagebrush Sandy looked in vain for an enemy, either coming or going.

Whoever it may have been, that one shot was all, and no sooner had it been sped than the would-be assassin fled without stopping to note his success—or the lack of it, rather.

It took but a fraction of a minute to convince the Sport that he was wasting time and eyesight looking for his enemy, and as sounds came from toward town, telling only too plainly that the shot had awakened a curiosity which might be difficult to satisfy by even innocent men, he turned toward Mallory Denport with hasty explanations.

"I hadn't time to ask by or with your leave, sir," he declared, at the same time slipping hand through an arm and urging the puzzled lawyer away by a round-about course. "I caught a glimpse of somebody with a gun feeling for the drop, and so—just that way!"

"I don't—who could it have been?"

"Now you've got me, pardner. I don't know. Wish I did!"

"But—why hurry off like this? Surely we haven't been guilty of anything to skulk for?" remonstrated the man of law.

"Of course not, yet—well, would it be wise to take all the camp into our confidence? And that is pretty much what it would amount to if we get caught out here. So—do as I do, please!"

Already quite a little excitement had been worked up by that shot, and a number of curious citizens were hurrying toward the spot from whence that sound echoed; but Sagebrush Sandy was thoroughly familiar with his present surroundings, and easily led Mr. Denport to town by a route which kept them hidden from all inconveniently curious eyes.

Neither man made further effort to renew the subject of interest which had brought about that meeting beneath the stars, but before parting with his companion there near the hotel, Sagebrush Sandy spoke:

"See you later, sir. For now, I'm going to bunk in. I'm sleepy as a dog who's been out all night on a sheep-killing expedition!"

However that may have been, the Sport told the truth to a certain degree, since he lost very little time in passing up stairs to the chamber set apart for his particular use, closing the door, and locking it after himself.

But while he made use of the narrow bed, 'twas to sit upon. And with elbows on knees and joined hands encircling chin and jaws, he stared at vacancy there in the dark, like one with brain particularly busy. And then, after nearly an hour spent thus he muttered lowly, to himself:

"It's a powerful temptation, surely! Shall I yield to it? Shall I?"

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW WORDS IN CONFIDENCE.

Arnold Eades formed one of the little company which took a hasty stroll to the outskirts of Skeleton Camp after that pistol shot stung forth upon the night air, but neither he nor the others gained any particular satisfaction through so moving.

Nothing whatever was found to indicate a tragedy, nor aught which could in any manner explain just why a good cartridge should have been wasted then and there.

Mr. Eades had rather more than a sneaking notion that Sagebrush Sandy was intimately connected with that nocturnal alarm, even if Mallory Denport was wholly innocent; for, strangely enough, as it seemed to himself, he had lost sight and track of both those gentlemen, in spite of his firm resolve to the contrary.

Nothing further came of the pistol firing, and after a bit that portion of the town calmed down.

Mr. Eades prowled around the hotel until he satisfied himself that Mr. Denport was present. He caught a glimpse of Milly Blythe, heard ward and guardian bid each other a pleasant good-night, and watched until the elderly gentleman was safely locked in his bed chamber.

Arnold neither saw nor heard aught of the Sport at Large, but he wasted another full hour in holding tab on that particular door, only giving over when fairly certain that, if the suggested interview had not already been held, it would hardly be kept that night.

Mr. Eades was astir bright and early in the morning, but hardly before the two gentlemen in whose movements he apparently felt so deep an interest.

On this occasion Miss Blythe bore her guardian company at table, and while Alexander Sage greeted both with easy politeness, the sport did not take a seat near them, nor did Arnold venture to do so.

So far as those watchful eyes could tell, no signal passed between sport and

lawyer, nor did either betray any especial interest in the other, although he could not help noticing how frequently Milly stole shy and puzzled glances in that direction.

"She don't know yes or no!" mused the detective, while watching from under cover of his shaggy brows. "Then the old gent hasn't posted her, if anything came of that interview—was there one, though?"

A puzzling question, which Arnold hardly knew how to answer.

After leaving the breakfast room, Mr. Eades spent a busy few hours trying to hold tab on two different men at the same time, although he had precious little to show for his labor at the end of that period.

Neither sport nor lawyer seemed eager for close communion, although they met as by accident on several occasions as they moved carelessly about the hotel.

Possibly the result might have been different had the detective been a bit less anxious to see and hear everything. Smart though he undeniably was, Mr. Eades betrayed himself through that very anxiety, and so placed both men more thoroughly upon their guard.

And then—just how was a sore puzzle to Mr. Eades—Sagebrush Sandy passed entirely off the stage, leaving not the slightest clew to his fitting or to his destination.

Mr. Denport remained, which was some slight consolation to the detective, but further watching in that quarter seemed worse than useless.

Like one thoroughly content with his present surroundings, guardian quieted down with ward in that dingy little "parlor," both reading books brought with them from far away, neither showing the slightest inclination toward taking a stroll or even viewing the camp by daylight.

Then, just when Mr. Eades felt that the whole world was hollow, and his doll stuffed with sawdust, a burly, rough-clad fellow gave him a covert nudge in passing, huskily mumbling:

"Hitch on ahind, boss, ef ye want to hear somethin' wuth a heap!"

Instantly the detective was himself again, cool and clear-witted, keenly scrutinizing the fellow, while adroitly concealing the fact.

An ill-favored specimen, when taken at his best, but just now particularly disreputable as to outward semblance.

A pair of gorgeously painted eyes, with sundry knuckle-cuts in the puffy flesh just below them. A bulbous nose, sprinkled with very promising whiskey-blossoms. Bristling beard, which carried plenty of tobacco stains. Soiled garments, which needed no other scent to make known the approach of their wearer.

All this was photographed by a single glance, and Arnold Eades at once set the fellow down as a typical tough in hard luck, yet one at least a single degree above the regular "bummer."

A scowl and impatient nod came from the "hard case" by way of additional invitation, then he slouched heavily away, leaving the hotel behind, moving a bit more quickly as a covert glance over the shoulder told that Arnold Eades was following after.

When satisfied that his man had taken his bait, the tough used fair judgment, making no move which could invite unwelcome curiosity, by a devious route picking his way through the camp and finally making out toward the hills, not so very wide of the course taken by Sagebrush Sandy and Mallory Denport the evening before.

Hardly knowing just what to expect, Arnold Eades seconded that tough-looking customer as best he knew how, but finally calling a halt when they were fairly out among the thick-lying rocks, with no sign of followers or of espial.

"This is far enough for a starter, my

good friend," Arnold declared as he slackened pace. "Now, then, what is it?"

The fellow seemed in no particular haste to make his business known, spending a few minutes in peering around, making sure they were as lonely as looked upon the surface.

But then he turned back, staring keenly into that face while saying:

"Who be ye, anyway, pardner? Shorely, you're one o' them critters which they call 'tectives, hain't ye, now?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Fer to find out, be course! Why wouldn't I, then?"

"You tell me. Did you ask me out here as a detective, or—"

"That's what; that's jest what!"

"Is that so? Well, why? What use can a fellow like you have for a man in the secret service?"

The fellow hesitated, and Arnold Eades spoke on:

"Not that I make the admission, mind you. Not that I think it's any of your business what my profession may or may not be. But, just for luck, suppose I was one: what good would that do you?"

"Waal, boss, ef you was one sech, an' happened to be out hyar in this wooden kentry, lookin' fer a sar'tin sort o' critter, an' a feller of 'bout my build an' giner'l 'pearance was to know what you wanted to know, an' he was to ax, would you let him go shet fer ary bit o' crooked work he'd mebbe done when times was too hard fer ary sort o' use, an'—"

Arnold Eades flung up a hand in protest.

"Stop for a breath, man alive! Who and what are you, anyway?"

"Dick Leach is my handle, boss, an' I'm—hev I ketched your sworn promise, fust, though?"

"Yes, if you really know anything worth the while. What is it?"

"Ef I could show ye the hull blamed trick which was set up onto ye, over yen way?" with a nod in the direction of the recent hold-up. "Ef I was to tell ye just who Cap'n Crook was, an' why the sport come in so durn slick—eh?"

If Arnold Eades felt any particular thrill at these cunningly significant hints nothing in his face betrayed the fact, although he spoke up promptly enough.

"Well, a fellow would naturally like to get even with those who gave him such a rough deal, but I'm not quite certain I catch on, yet. You were one of the tough nuts, I take it, stranger?"

Dick Leach hesitated a bit, but then flung caution to the winds.

"Yes. I was one of 'em. I kin tell ye all 'bout Cap'n Crook, an' fix matters so ye kin run him in jest as easy, whenever you want. But—would it be wuth my while fer to take all that trouble an' risk?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Business, an' you know it! Say, you'll whack up honest with me ef I do all I say I kin. Give me—waal, I'll not play hog, pardner. Say I'll ketch one-quarter of the rake-off, an' it's a whack."

A keen and searching gaze which lasted for several seconds, then Arnold Eades made answer.

"All right. If I make the capture and finger anything in the way of reward—"

"Anything?" echoed the ruffian, with a sharp catch in his perfumed breath. "Holy Ghost! Hain't twenty thousand plunks anything, hey?"

"Twenty thousand—what do you mean?"

Arnold Eades was startled out of his forced composure, and showed as much in both face and voice. He gripped an arm tightly, almost fiercely, shaking the knave as though in savage rage.

But Dick Leach chuckled, in grim satisfaction, feeling at last that he had made a fair strike.

"Didn't reckon anything like that, boss, did ye? Waal, it's gospel truth, all the same, an' right hyar stan's the chicken what kin prove his claim, fust clatter!"

"You mean that—what do you mean, anyway?"

"That the critter who's bin workin' this stretch o' road o' late is raally named Caspar Austin!"

"What? If you are lying to me—"

"Stiddy, boss. I hain't nigh got to the bottom o' the bag yit," the fellow coolly interposed, then adding with distinctness: "An' Caspar Austin is Sagebrush Sandy—divil a bit the less, now!"

Again an exclamation of incredulity came from the detective, and again did Dick Leach lift a restraining paw, but this time utilizing it further by indicating his bruised and discolored face.

"Oh, I means it all; every word an' every letter, boss! An' right hyar you kin see some o' my reasons fer blowin' the gaff, too. Ef not, why not? Ef he didn't keer fer me holdin' my hush—but he up'n give me all these, with heap-sight more'n your peepers kin see, jest now!"

Leach lowered a hand to slip it behind his body, making a wry grimace, as though touch proved only less painful than the original application.

Everything went to prove that the fellow was in earnest, yet Arnold Eades found it more than difficult to place full confidence in his information, so startling and so important—if reliable.

"He gev 'em all to me, cuss him from now to never-come-back!" viciously repeated the ruffian. "I'd play even ef thar wasn't a rusty cent into it all, but now—I'll hang him so high the stars'll swinge the ha'r o' his head; yes, I will, now!"

Gradually growing convinced that the fellow was speaking the truth, Arnold Eades readily grasped the situation, speaking crisply:

"Talk white and I'll play you on the dead square, pardner. Now—go, on! Make it clear as you play, though."

"All right, an' I'll take my chances, ruther then slip this way o' pullin' out even fer all—all right!"

Leach drew a bit closer, speaking rapidly and to the point. He declared that the notorious road-agent had been playing a double role ever since organizing his gang for business in the vicinity of Skeleton Camp; Captain Crook on the road, and Sagebrush Sandy while without mask.

"That's pritty much the way he run matters yest'day, d'ye mind, sir? An' 'twas long of word he sent down hyar fer the lads to git a good ready on, that we pinched you like we done did. See?"

"Steady, there! You say that Sagebrush Sandy is Captain Crook?"

"You bet he is, then!"

"Then who played Captain Crook while Sagebrush was keeping me company?" sharply demanded the detective. "Out with it, and don't stop to hatch up a more plausible lie, either!"

But Dick Leach showed teeth in a cheerful grin, in no wise put out.

CHAPTER X.

BETRAYING HIS MASTER.

"One o' the boys done tuck keer o' that, bless ye, pardner," came the easy response.

"One of the boys?"

"That's what. I hain't namin' no names, mind ye. I won't do that, nuther, 'less I'm jest 'bleeged to. Fer why: I hain't holdin' no gredge against ary one o' the gang 'ceptin' the boss him own self, an' so—you ketch on, pardner?"

All through this chatter those keen eyes were scanning face, and as the self-confessed road-agent paused, Arnold Eades spoke out, sternly:

"I believe you are an infernal liar from start to finish!"

Plain speech, surely, yet Dick Leach grinned instead of scowling, more like one who had received a compliment than an insult.

"That's all right ef you kin make it come out right, pardner," he said, easily. "What I know I know, an' what I say

I kin fetch the papers fer to prove, ye mind?"

"If you can do that—"

"Which I'm gwine to, shorely, boss. I'll prove every speck an' spatter of it all, or—tell me this, will you? Why didn't the sport come right 'long with you, over thar?"

"Because he broke a stirrup-leather."

"Beca'se he wanted to give us a fa'r chance to pinch you past his hevin' to chip in, better say," swiftly amended Mr. Leach, still broadly agrin, like one who felt pleasure in convincing a "smart" man how thoroughly he had been befooled by those far smarter.

"But he surely did chip, as you call it," persisted Eades. "His horse was killed, and at such long range—"

A savage curse broke from those bearded lips, and Dick Leach swung a tightly clenched fist as though fairly aching to dash it full in the face of a hated enemy.

There was no broad grin to be seen now, and the doubts held so far by the detective began to melt away before conviction.

Surely this was not acting? Surely this was genuine hatred such as no man feels without thirsting for blood.

"Yes, his hoss was killed, but it ought to've bin him, durn an' double-durn him all over!" savagely growled the burly ruffian. "An' it would 'a' bin him, too, only fer a twist o' crooked luck which—devil roast him fer supper!"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Eades, curious to get at the inmost facts of this puzzling case. "If 'twas all a put-up job, as you say, why would he take so many long chances of getting what his nag caught?"

"He didn't know 'twas to come jest that way," explained Leach, choking down his vicious anger as best he might. "'Course there was to be jest so much shootin', to foolish ye cl'ar up to the nines, an' to make it all seem more bindin'; but as fer hittin'—that was dif'rent!"

"Go on. You mean more than you've said, so far."

"Waal, you're pritty nigh right 'bout that, pardner. I done that hittin', but my gun must 'a' went back onto me—cuss it! I 'lowed fer to drap the man-critter, too cold fer skinnin', an' so play even fer more gredges then one—"

"What? Meant to kill the—Sagebrush Sandy?"

"You bet your sweet life I just did, then," doggedly vowed the road-agent. What better chainece could a feller ax fer? The boys was all pickin' trigger, shootin' high, 'cordin to orders, but then—waal, ef he was to git slung, who was to say from which forty-four the blue whistler come out of, hey?"

A keen gaze, then Arnold Eades muttered:

"You talk just as though you meant it all, too!"

"That's all right, pardner. Ef you ketch me in ary lie, jest you dock my wages 'cordin, an' I'll never kick," more quietly spoke the ruffian. "I slipped up on it, though, an' I ketched my pay, later on."

"Waal, boss, I done shot my level, but all the rest was plum' foolishness an' trickery, whar you played clown to the outfit, with Cap'n Crook's double as ringmaster."

"To what end, though?" asked the detective. "You talk just as though you meant it all, but I'm not nearly so sure as I'd like to be."

"Which?"

"That you're not lying for some hidden reason, confound you!"

"Augh! come off, you!" exploded Mr. Leach in disgust at such stupidity. "Why would I play monkey, then? Fer what—you make me tired!"

"Well, I'm trying to study out just why you should take such long chances, myself," coolly added the detective.

"I done tuck them back yender, when I pulled down on the boss 'stead o' aimin'

high," declared the rascal, grinning anew. "As fer you—ef I hain't runnin' a chalkline, boss, then no man never did!"

"All right. Take your word for it—now. Later on, perhaps, we may have to argue the matter after another fashion."

Quietly enough the words came, yet underlying them was a grim threat which might well have caused a traitor to quail; but not so Dick Leach.

"You're wastin' time thinkin' that way, boss, but it's your own, an' I reckon you kin han'le it 'cordin' to your own likin'. As fer me—this is the idee of it, now."

"I'm tellin' ye jest what I know to be a fact. I hain't tryin' to cl'ar 'way the mud 'nother critter done stirred up. Ef that hes to be did, you kin try. I'm out of that much. So—like this yer:

"Sagebrush done mended his part the best he could, while the trick Cap'n Crook worked the pump onto you, 'cordin' to orders."

"Jest what them orders was, or jest what he 'lowed to squeeze out o' you, I hain't sayin', fer I don't know. Nobody didn't, I reckon, onless 'twas the lad who tuck that place fer the 'casion."

Dick Leach paused, as though half-expecting some light to be thrown upon that subject by Mr. Eades, but if so he was disappointed.

"Go on," quietly ordered the detective. "Make a clean job of it, pardner."

"All right, sir. Thar's a heap mo' to tell, but I kin bile it down to a tol'able small mess, a'ter all. An' so—like this way:

"You know what was said an' done when you was tuck from the road back thar nigh the prospect hole? Waal, I was the critter done told off fer to play hoss-guard; wuss luck me!"

"How so? What do you mean by that?"

"D'ye see these yer gig-lamps, boss?" asked Leach, lifting his hand to point at his discolored optics.

"A right sweet set, for a fact," admitted the detective, with a fleeting smile.

"How did you find them, pardner?"

"They done come my way, all in a bunch; bunch of fives, too!" with a sickly grin. "He done that, ye know! Priddy rough play, don't ye think?"

"When Sagebrush Sandy surprised you and stamped the horses, was it?" asked Arnold Eades, lifting his brows a bit, as fresh light seemed dawning upon an obscure spot.

"Waal, I was lookin' fer that, but sca'cely fer this," once more touching the discolored flesh. "Which is one good reason why I'm a-kickin' so turrible rough right now!"

"To play even with Sandy, of course?"

"You bet yer sweet life! An' so—thar he come, on the keen jump, priddy close to schedule time, an' not fur from the way all hed bin sot down at the start; but then—zip-biff-blizzer!"

"Slap-bang, he ketched me right whar I looked, knockin' me forty ways fer Sunday, ef I do say it myself! An' then—waal, boss, hope I may never see the back o' my neck ag'in ef he didn't wipe both boots right whar I feel it most when I done hit a cheer; an' wiped them too pizen hard fer ary sort o' use!"

In spite of his natural anxiety to get at the bottom of the whole affair, Arnold Eades could not help laughing a bit at this exposition; for Richard was wonderfully in earnest, and his working features would have provoked a smile upon the face of a graven statue just then.

"You kin snort to snicker, boss, but me—ef I didn't count on playin' even fer it all, durn my cats ef I wouldn't—but whar's the sense? He done tuck me foul, an' when I far'ly come to—waal, then wasn't no time fer to play fer even-up!"

"And the shooting was—not at yourself, pardner?" asked Eades, his face smoothing down once more and his eyes still aglow with eagerness.

"No. Jest to make the hull joke sound mo' bindin', ye see," explained the traitor.

"Steady, there," with suspicion sharply showing its head. "If you were suspected of firing those shots to kill, why didn't Sagebrush do for you when the chance came squarely in his way? Careful, now!"

"That's easy 'nough, boss. He might think, but he couldn't know. So fur's he could tell, jest then, I was playin' my part 'cordin' to Gunter. Ef he'd shot to croak, how'd he 'count fer it to the rest o' the boys?"

"If really Captain Crook, why should he have to account for his actions, though?"

"Jest the same as ary one of us," doggedly declared the road-agent. "Ef he could 'a' knowed fer dead shore I'd done my level to throw him cold, he'd plunked me one, an' held that up as his good excuse ef the boys jerked him up 'bout it later on."

"He never knowed that, nur he couldn't know it. Reckon he hed a pritty strong notion that way, from his hard hittin', top an' bottom, but—waal, you're gittin' a straight deal, boss, an' I'm tellin' you what was, not what mought 'a' bin."

"All right. Go on with your story, pardner."

"Waal, thar hain't so mighty much mo' to tell which you cain't do the easy figgerin' of your own self, pardner, but that is like this:

"Sagebrush, he jest giv me the grand dump, turned the critters loose fur 'nough, so they'd make a big clatter, but mought be ketched up ag'in in a hurry, bu'sted a couple o' caps, then ducked 'round fer to set you loose; d'you understand?"

Arnold Eades was listening as closely as he was watching keenly, as yet undecided whether to believe in part, in whole, or to reject everything as a tissue of cunning lies.

There was one weak spot in the narrative, it seemed to him, and he clapped a verbal finger upon it instanter.

"Steady, there! If all this is so; if the whole thing was a put-up job, as you assert, why did Captain Crook hurry back so quickly? Why didn't it take longer to catch up the nags, and so let us slip clean off?"

"To make the hull thing look mo' bindin'," promptly answered the road-agent, in no wise disconcerted.

Arnold Eades shook his head, dissatisfied.

"I can't make it come reasonable, try as I may! It's a wildly improbable story, and full of—you're lying to me, fellow!"

"Don't you begin to think that way, boss," earnestly cried Leach, shaking his head, emphatically. "Why would I lie to you that way?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to find out, and when I do—"

"The sooner you done quit that same tryin', boss, the better use you'll be makin' of your time. An'—why, man, how kin ye help but see it the right way? Ef not, how come ye to be sot free 'tall?"

Arnold Eades gave a slight start at this swift query, and, fancying that he had won a point right then and there, Dick Leach rapidly added:

"Ef 'twas all in dead airnest; ef it wasn't jest a sweet little take-off to gain some eend which I hain't smart 'nough fer to smoke, so soon; why was ye left like that to be sot free?"

"What do you mean?"

"Jest like this: Ef Cap'n Crook done hated ye bad 'nough fer to bury ye alive, why didn't he kill ye all at once when it looked like thar was a spoke gone loose?"

"Would he 'a' moseyed off that-a-way, takin' every man-jack 'long at his heels, leavin' you thar to your lonesome? An', later on; how come ye to take that tum'le down the rocks when ye tried to plug the cap'n?"

CHAPTER XI.

SAGEBRUSH SANDY DROPS A HINT.

That seemed to be drawing two wide ends pretty close together, but Arnold Eades caught the connection readily enough, giving a bit of an oath as he recalled that particular portion of his past.

"Surely that was an accident?" he half asked, half asserted, flushing again under the mocking gaze and low chuckle of his disreputable-looking companion.

"A accidental on puppose, ye better say, pardner, sence that wor the way to it all. I thought ye knowed, at the time, fer I seed ye—"

"You were with the outfit, then?"

"Be course; why wouldn't I?"

"Then—I took it for granted you had quarreled with Captain Crook, since you're here trying to sell him out."

"Me? Him? Don't you begin fer to think it that way, pardner! Course, thar wasn't no time jest then fer to explanify, sence he hed to pull the wool still furd'er over your eyes—"

"Why all that? What object could he have in so deceiving me?"

"You tell! Ef I knowed better jest why you're out hyar huntin' in kiver fer a feller named Austin—see?"

"Then you really believe all this? That Sagebrush Sandy is Captain Crook, and Captain Crook is Caspar Austin?"

"Waal, pardner, I know the fust, an' I'm pritty nigh dead shore as to t'other," earnestly answered the road-agent. "Ef not, why not? What made him take so many pains fer to pinch an' pump, then let slip clean out o' the hobbles? An' why wasn't they mo' man-blood spilt with all that shootin'?"

"Jest stop an' take a clean-eye squint back over the hull funny business, pardner. Jest count it all up, an' top off with the pritty hunch-over Sagebrush giv' ye thar over the hearse when ye tried fer to do some shootin' that'd count."

"He did—I've been thinking that way ever since!" exploded the detective, hands clenching tightly and eyes aglow. "I felt something—now I know 'twas his foot, or his hand, giving me the dump! And—but you haven't said it all yet. Go on. My turn will follow."

"Waal, I don't know. 'Pears to me I've done opened yer peepers a bit, an' the rest comes fer you to sort out a'cordin'. But—one thing: Mind yer two eyes, pardner!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Fa'r warnin', no less. He's a pizen bad man to tackle, ary holt ye like best. Bad medicine, with all in big letters!"

"Yet you are going flatly against him, unless all this is but a continuation of the funny business, as you call it," just a bit suspiciously spoke the detective.

Arnold Eades was very nearly convinced that this fellow was in ugly earnest, yet a doubt would linger, and this formed an echo of it.

Again Richard breathed forth curses, and again he called attention to his beautifully ornamented phiz.

"Hain't thar a-plenty fer to kick over? An' them hain't a weenty patchin' fer the hull story, boss; no it hain't, now! An' so—you was one o' the critters as made a break out this yer way last night, I take it; wasn't ye?"

"Yes, but—go on, will you?"

Dick Leach cast a swift glance around them, but seeing naught to give him further uneasiness, he spoke on in lowered tones:

"I done wasted that ca'tridge, pardner!"

"You shot at—not at Sagebrush Sandy?"

"That's what I did, too! Fool trick, fer 'twas too long a pull fer shore work, an' to mighty muddy light fer huntin' the heart of a manlike the Sport; an' yit—waal, that same dark helped me big in lightin' out, anyway!"

Arnold Eades listened to this confession with poorly suppressed excitement, but now a hand gripped shoulder and its mate shook menacingly in front of that embroidered visage as he spoke, sternly:

"Try that again, curse you, and I'll

give you double dose; understand what that means?"

Leach showed teeth in a surly grin, but nodded his head.

"That's all right, pardner. I didn't mean fer to play sech a keerd, but it ketched me all in a lump; I jest up an' let blizzer 'thout stoppin' to ax was it business or durn foolery."

"Well, don't you try it again."

"Bless ye, boss, I hain't like to," frankly admitted the rascal. "I hain't got clean over shiverin' in the boots o' me, till yit! Fer—now you hear me good! That same critter is a terrible bad man to fool with, an' ye don't want to take ary long chainces; no ye don't, now!"

"Yet you insist upon it that the three are one and the same person, under different names?"

"I'm a-tellin' ye jest that, boss," earnestly assured Richard. "An' when the right time rolls 'round, hyar's the chicken as'll prove every say-so he's bin a-slingin' at ye, too!"

"All right. I'll put you to the test, most likely. But for now, just what course would you advise?"

"Which?"

"If you stood in my shoes and wanted to make a clean job of it all, what would be your first card in play?"

"I'd pinch him; in a holy hurry, too! An'—don't ye give him the ghost of a show to pull a gun, pardner, or thar'll be a funeral, an' you'll hev a front seat counted out to ye—dead shorely, now!"

"All right. I'll bear your warning in hand if—I say, lad?"

"Keep right on a-sayin' of it, then."

"Of course I can count on you to help me? You'll back me up in making this arrest?"

Instead of giving the eager asent which might have been expected, Dick Leach turned a sickly yellow, shrinking back like one smitten by terror.

Something in that face warned the detective, and, wheeling swiftly, Arnold Eades caught sight of Sagebrush Sandy at the edge of the rocky tract, only a few rods distant, leisurely moving their way.

A hot, fierce glow leaped into his eyes and his right hand slipped to revolver-butt as he muttered, hoarsely:

"That demon; playing spy! I'll take him right now if you—"

While speaking Eades turned face that way, only to break off with a savage curse as he saw—only the rear of his doughty aid, for Richard had turned tail and was skulking off out of danger with a celerity marvelously nigh being a run.

Just the one glance after his valorous partner, then Arnold turned again to the latest comer, gripping pistol as though he meant to do all the work by his lonesome; but a change had taken place in that quarter as well.

The Sport at Large was smiling blandly enough, but his right hand was resting on the hip where his pet gun hung, and Eades hesitated to draw; the next moment his chance was fairly gone.

Without seeming to alter his course intentionally, the Sport put a fair-sized bowlder between them while advancing, only his head and upper-trunk showing plainly enough for a target.

At sight of a hostile movement, what would be easier than to drop behind a bullet-proof breastwork, thus having his adversary out in the open, where he might perforate his anatomy at his own sweet will?

So Arnold Eades reasoned, and, lacking considerable of being an idiot, he made the best of a none too good situation, forcing a smile as he met those keen brown eyes.

The smile faded out of the Sport's face at the same moment, and he spoke brusquely enough:

"Who's your friend, and where's he gone to in such a hurry, Mr. Eades?"

"I don't—what's that to you, sir?"

"What do I mean, is it?" asked Sagebrush Sandy, coming closer and making no pretense at cordiality. "Just this much, my friend,

"You're no peticoat-wearer, and I can afford to talk without first trimming the knots and peeling off all rough bark. So—this isn't the right sort of climate for you, Mr. Eades."

"What do you mean? What am I to understand by—"

The detective turned a bit paler than ordinary, and his voice was hardly as firm as it might be just then.

Not that he was inspired by personal fear. To do him full justice there was very little of the craven about this man. But, somehow, Sagebrush Sandy had a manner which was peculiarly trying to the nerves!

"Well, I'll try to make you comprehend just what happens to be the naked truth, Mr. Eades. You are wholly out of place here. Better cut your trip short and go back where you started from. Understand that?"

"Why should I do all that, pray?"

"Well, a hint to the wise ought to be sufficient, according to rule, and whatever else you may be, you're no fool. Need I say more?"

Grimly enough came the thinly veiled warning, and the two men stood face to face, eye to eye, neither flinching.

A brief pause thus, then Arnold Eader gave a slow nod as of full comprehension, permitting his thick lip to curl just a trifle, while what might be termed the shadow of a smile flitted into and out of his face.

"All right, Mr. Sagebrush. I'll take that hint in the same spirit it's offered me. Thanks, awfully!"

"Then you will turn back?"

"Yes."

"When?"

Another wan smile as those lids partly closed over the glowing eyes, then Arnold Eades made answer in those same curiously even tones which he had assumed for the occasion.

"Well, possibly I may be able to catch the stage for Dirigo to-morrow, or—I suppose I might hoof it, on a tight pinch."

"Staging would come easier, Mr. Eades."

"Would it be equally safe for a fellow of my dimensions, though?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, if Captain Crook should take another notion to have some fun at my expense, wouldn't it be a pity to haul other parties into the mix? If I'm by my lonesome, no other person can kick, you see."

A young kitten could hardly have purred more innocently, and Sagebrush Sandy smiled a bit as he looked and listened. Still, he was not to be diverted from the line marked out for the occasion, and spoke on:

"That's as you prefer, Mr. Eades. I've given you fair warnin'—"

"How kind of you to take upon yourself so much trouble!"

"I'm not kicking. And you—no serious offense taken, I hope?"

"Why should I take offense when none was meant? Instead, I owe you thanks—many times over!"

"Is that honest, or—for what, pray?" asked the Sport at Large, suspecting something more than was showing on the surface.

"For deciding a mighty unsettled mind, for one thing," came the quick response. "I begin to feel that this blessed Captain Crook holds entirely too many guns for me, and as he appears to rule the roost in these quarters, but one thing remains for a wise man, as you hinted."

"You mean to act upon that little hint, then?"

"Yes. If you don't happen to see me again, pardner, be good to yourself," lightly said Mr. Eades, turning a bit to steer clear of the Sport, then making fair sail for Skeleton Camp.

Sagebrush Sandy made no attempt to check that masterly retreat, holding his position and gazing keenly after the farmerlike figure as the detective passed on.

"Wonder how much of all that is real, how much humbug?" the Sport mused, frowning darkly the while. "I can't trust the fellow for a cent; still, I hope I'll not have to—ought I to have plugged the rascal, after all?"

CHAPTER XII.

FIST, GUN AND HANDCUFFS.

Having nothing of greater importance to occupy his time and attention that same evening, Sagebrush Sandy "put on his best bib and tucker" and sallied forth to "take in the town."

This was a periodical affair with him, it appeared, coming as a sort of interlude between more serious business spells.

On such occasions Sandy might—and in all probability would—take a hand in a friendly game where stakes might run high or low, just as the run of the papers seemed to justify; but he did not make it a business, as upon other occasions, when his depleted treasury called for financial reinforcements.

Then, too, it chanced that Arnold Eades was inspired by something of that same spirit, possibly deeming it no more than fair that he should take away with him a mental photograph of this, one of the few remaining mining camps of the good old style.

Mr. Eades took far less trouble with his outward seeming than did the Sport at Large.

For one thing, he was blessed with very little luggage, having nothing more than he carried upon his back, if the truth must be told, and those garments had suffered no little while he was being "foolished" by Captain Crook and his merry men.

Still, the detective was by no means thin-skinned, and with his private opinion concerning these inhabitants of Skelton Camp, why should he care?

The camp was not a very extensive city, although it was remarkably lively for its size.

One would naturally think that two men, bound upon pretty much the same errand, would not be long in meeting up with each other; but such was hardly the case, for hour after hour rolled over their heads without bringing the sport and the detective together under the same roof-tree.

Arnold Eades put on very few frills for the occasion, saying but little more than he found absolutely necessary, and doing nothing to attract especial notice his way, for reasons which he held good and sufficient.

Still, a stranger can hardly expect to put in a full night going the rounds after that fashion without meeting more or less of interest, nor was this to be an exceptional case.

The first inkling of trouble in the air came while Arnold Eades was in the Red Light Saloon, leisurely sipping a glass of fairly good whisky, keeping himself well in the background near the closed end of the long bar.

Up to this time he had run across nothing to pay him for the trouble he was taking; for, as a matter of course, these rounds had a particular object in view.

But now, coming from the open doorway, a fairly familiar voice touched the detective's ear, and glancing quickly that way, Eades recognized Dick Leach, the self-confessed road-agent who so intensely hated his master, if his own words were to be believed.

With Richard came another chip off the same block, if looks and attire went for aught; but, unlike Leach, this tough nut was pretty well under the influence of strong waters.

He came with a whoop and a yell, fetching up near the middle of the room with a clumsy lurch and still more clumsy attempt to crack his heels together in the air.

"Hi-yah, an' yip-yip!" he squealed, shrilly, flinging a battered felt hat to the ceiling, then meeting it with a foot as it came sailing down.

"Hyar I be, fat, ragged an' sassy! Head up an' tail over the dasher, snashin' bit an' chompin' froth tell ye cain't rest! Come an' see me, all ye fighters from up the crick! Come an'—what's the matter o' you?"

"Augh, you make me all over tired, pardner," impatiently cried Dick Leach as he caught an arm and gave it a shake which nearly upset the bibulous knave.

"I'll make you all over—look at the lamps of him, will ye? Jest look at them blinkers which—he-haw an' ho—who!" fairly roared the fellow, as though just then taking notice of the marks left behind by the deft fists of the Sport at Large.

"You never done that paintin', anyway, Honest Ike," surlily retorted the wearer of those illuminated optics. "'Cause why: You cain't begin fer to spell a-b-u-l—able!"

"I cain't—hammer you, pardner? Me? You? Thump?" huskily cried the drunkard, turning from fierce to maudlin, as one in his condition will so frequently do. "Lawd slobber all over ye, pardy! I'd ruther hug an' kiss an'—"

"Get out, you blame idjit!"

Flushing hotly at the laugh which this loving action drew from the little crowd, Leach fairly flung the big fellow from him, that action taking Honest Ike closer to the spot where Arnold Eades was draining his glass and taking silent notes.

Those bleared eyes rested upon the face of the detective, and instantly came a change as remarkable as it was complete.

Only a moment before Honest Ike seemed almost too drunk to stand alone, but now he was all alert, all nerve and muscle, lips drawing back in an ominous smile of recognition, as he stared into the face before him.

Mr. Eades flushed a bit, but he could not beat a retreat without pushing right against this burly ruffian, and he had no such notion. He naturally preferred no trouble, but if it must come, he would meet it fairly, never in disorderly retreat.

"Durned ef it hain't the pizen critter we hustled so lively when thar was a—"

Dick Leach likewise recognized the detective, and, with a half-smothered curse at the worse than folly displayed by his comrade, sprung forward and gripped an arm, shaking it savagely as he hissed a low warning.

"Shet, ye bloody fool! Don't ye know—mind yer eye, Ike!"

"Git out, you! Mind me eye? I'll mind this pair o' peepers ef he don't—git down on yer hunkers an' eat dirt, cuss ye fer a fraud!"

Shaking off his mate, Honest Ike reached out to grasp the man in front, but Arnold Eades knew a trick worth two of that; ducking his head to one side, then rising close to the big fellow, his right arm shooting up in time with his body, hard-clenched fist striking fairly on the point of the bully's chin with an upper-cut.

Up flew the arms of the giant, but not to deal a blow. Back went his head, but not of its owner's volition.

Honest Ike helped greatly in his own downfall, for his mouth was open and his jaws separated when that blow came, driving the jaws together with a sudden force which fairly jarred his brain into chaos, sending his huge hulk backward in a dizzy dance, arms a-quiver and eyes nearly popping out of their sockets as he staggered to his fall.

Just that one swift thrust of fist, but Arnold Eades knew right well that his little game was safe, so far, and that any further application would be cruelty to animals.

He never gave Honest Ike a second look, in fact, but raised erect and swiftly drew a brace of forty-fours, hammers coming back with ominous clicks as the weapons reached their level.

"Steady, all!" cried the detective, deft-

ly making two guns cover a round score of living targets. "I'm a man of peace, but you can't trample all over my corn-field without me saying something. And that something is—hands off, until I've fairly settled with yonder hulking brute!"

"Settle?" echoed Dick Leach, with a half-grin, as he looked at that shivering hulk on the sanded floor. "Waal, ef Honest Ike hain't settled fer keeps—hellow, pardy!"

For the big fellow was struggling to regain his footing, groaning and cursing, mumbling and spitting blood, plainly with thick wits all abroad, yet just as clearly fumbling after a weapon with thoughts of speedy revenge.

Arnold Eades saw this blind movement, and one of his own guns came down to cover the ruffian, for he had no idea of falling a victim to mistaken chivalry. And in sharply distinct tones he called forth a warning:

"Steady, Honest Ike, since that appears to be your handle."

"I'll handle you ef—who done kicked me?"

"The hull blessed airth done jumped up an' slammed ye under the tater-trap, pardy," laughingly explained Leach, but then, falling back a bit as the man with the drop spoke again:

"Touch lightly, there! Keep your paws off, my friend, until we two can settle our own little dispute. And you, Honest Ike—"

"I'll kill ye like I would a—"

The big fellow came up with a lurch, but was still too nearly blinded for even sighting his conqueror, and with a swift replacing of pistol to leave his terrible right free, Arnold Eades sprung forward to strike once more, exactly duplicating that initial blow.

This time the giant went down with fewer preliminaries, but went down with a force which fairly shook the house.

Cat-like in his movements so far as celerity went, Eades tore away the leather belt which encircled that middle and supported guns and an ugly knife, giving the whole a deft toss which carried it over behind the bar, where it would be safe from meddling fingers on that side of the barrier, at least.

"I couldn't do any less, and I don't care to do any more, gentlemen," said the detective, as he again came back with rear guard by the bar, his cool eyes flashing around the crowd. "I struck, simply because I didn't care to be mauled. I might have shot, with less trouble, if not greater effect, but that isn't in my line of business."

"You could hardly have done better, my dear fellow," came a clear, cheery voice from the front, and then Sagebrush Sandy stepped inside the Red Light, smiling as he glanced from brute to victor.

Was it purely instinct which caused the muzzle of a revolver to shift in line with the body of the latest comer?

The Sport at Large could hardly have missed taking note of this, but he showed no trace of uneasiness or of annoyance at having the drop caught so cleverly, moving forward as cool as you please, giving the quivering carcass a light touch with a toe of his polished boot as he paused for a brief look downward.

"You really think so, do you, Mr. Sage?" asked the detective, forcing a smile to fit the occasion, his pistol slowly lowering, as no hostile action on the other side seemed probable.

"I do, for an honest fact, my dear fellow," declared the sport, coming that way with a genial smile. "Honest Ike has been spoiling for just such a lesson as this, and he'll be worth tenfold as much after he gets the cobwebs fairly out of his brain."

Gray eyes met brown orbs squarely for a few seconds, and then Arnold Eades, like one who feels perfectly safe among true friends, replaced his pistol, smiling broadly as he spoke again.

"Do you know, sport, when I first saw you coming to the front, I actually fancied you meant to take this quarrel upon your own shoulders!"

"I take up Honest Ike's quarrel?"

"That's what I thought, first-off. Foolish, wasn't it?"

"Well, now, I should remark! If anything, I owe you hearty thanks for serving the hulking brute out after this fashion."

"Why so? Your interest in him is so strong, then?"

"Because I felt that the time was coming when I might have to read the big fellow a little lecture on my own hook. See?"

"Well, if that's all, you can wait a bit, I fancy," with a low laugh, as he looked toward that still prostrate figure. "But, Mr. Sage, since you feel that way, what's the matter with our taking a drink and shaking hands over the bargain?"

"With all the pleasure in life, my dear sir!" cried the sport, hands coming forth to—have irons deftly snapped about his wrists ere he could so much as suspect trouble or treachery!

Then Arnold Eades faced the crowd with both guns drawn and cocked.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DETECTIVE HOLDS HIS GRIP.

"Stand back, the pile o' ye!" fairly thundered the detective as his keen gray eyes flashed over those tubes of death. "Back, I say! This man is my game, and I'll kill the first fellow who dares lift finger in my way!"

No more complete surprise could possibly have been sprung upon either public or person, and for once in his life the Sport at Large was fairly dumfounded.

He even stared at the irons as though 'twas impossible to recognize them, or to realize just what they might mean.

But then, as Arnold Eades flung forth his warning and defiance combined, something of the ugly truth flashed upon his half-dazed brain, and, with a hoarse cry, Sagebrush Sandy clenched hands and lifted arms as though he would dash the brains from that thick skull before him.

Even more swiftly the detective shifted position far enough to cover his man with a gun, while keeping its mate in readiness for any other who might show an ugly inclination, sternly speaking:

"Careful, Sport! You're worth just as much to me dead as living, remember! Don't make me shoot unless—back, the pile o' ye, I say!"

It was a difficult situation for any one man to command, but Arnold Eades proved himself one of a thousand just then, doing as well as the best could expect, and far better than the vast majority.

More: His eyes and stern-set face declared that he would back up his words by actions to suit, and that went a long way with men of the present calibre.

Even Alexander Sage seemed impressed, for his fingers came apart and his hands lowered without a blow being struck. A forced smile came into his face, and then he called out, clearly:

"Touch lightly, friends! Don't you come into the mix, for I'm—"

More than one threatening voice made itself heard just then, drowning what the sport might be saying, and dangerous tools were showing under the lamplight.

A single word, a single look or nod, even, from the right quarter would have sent a bloody death swiftly upon the man-hunter; but that signal was not given just then.

"In the name of the law!" cried Arnold Eades, thinking best to make his status known as quickly as might be. "I am a regular officer, and I hold papers for this man. Interfere on your peril!"

"Keep your linen on, friends," supplemented the sport, no longer at large, however, but growing into his customary cool, easy-going self once more. "Pity to spoil sport, even if the joke does seem

to turn against one of your old chums. So—give the pretty gentleman a chance, I beg of you!”

“We’ll give him a rope or a blue whistler—cus him fer a onbaked idjit!” indignantly cried one of the rough-clad diggers.

“You bet ye! What right ur license hes the likes o’ him comin’ out hyar in God’s kentry fer to play dirt all over a gent which is—augh! kick him into next county! An’ hyar’s the cowhide fer the fust boost!”

“Keep back or I’ll open fire!”

“You shoot an’ we’ll skin!”

“Give him a jolt, jest fer luck!”

Again Sagebrush Sandy interposed on behalf of an enemy; for, surely, Arnold Eades could be termed nothing less.

A word, a nod, even continued silence would have been more than sufficient to end matters so far as the detective was concerned, and nearly every man thus taken prisoner under pretense of an amicable hand-sake would have let matters run their course.

Not so the sport, although he may not have been altogether moved by mercy; that pistol still kept him covered, and a slight crook of forefinger would almost certainly send him over the range for all time.

“Stop, I say, friends!” he called out, almost harshly. “Don’t make a bad matter worse, I ask you. Give this fellow a chance to explain why he makes such a move. I ask it as an old chum; you understand that?”

Evidently they did, for the fellows fell back a bit, and the more serious danger was passing by.

Arnold Eades certainly felt little love or even friendship for the man whose voice was lifted as a shield before his life, but he had sense enough to see that milder measures would serve his ends the best, and so made the most of the opportunity offered.

“Will you give me your word of honor that you’ll not try to escape if I take your parole, Sagebrush?” he asked, quickly.

“For how long?”

“Fix the limits yourself, sir.”

“All right. Parole goes until—well, I’ll give you fair and honest warning when I grow weary of lying under double bonds. Now—what comes next?”

While the sport was speaking Eades put up one of his guns, but kept the other in left hand, ready to use upon any of that interested crowd who might try a bad break on the chance.

“Truce it is, Sandy, and now I’ll try to show your friends just why I opened this little dance.”

That freed hand slipped into bosom, then came forth with a colored dodger similar to the one taken from him by Captain Crook.

“Right here you have it all, gentlemen, boiled down to suit almost any carping taste! Twenty thousand dollars reward, and all for finding a certain man or furnishing proofs of his death. Now—that man named here is—right under my hand!”

The detective suited action to words, but with a dexterous squirm the sport slipped from under that unwelcome touch, leaning against the bar in careless attitude and smiling broadly as he spoke in turn:

“That may be gospel so far as the placard goes, but as for the man—not any! I’m not Caspar Austin. I never was Caspar Austin. I never expect to become Caspar Austin. Hence—you’re making a most elegant john-donkey out of your mother’s pet infant, Mr. Eades!”

“I can prove every word I say. I can show past the shadow of a doubt that you are Caspar Austin, wanted for—wanted badly enough for a neat little pile of rocks to be offered for your production, either dead or alive.”

“Then you can prove a lie, Mr. Eades,” coolly said the Sport.

“Of course you would deny everything. That’s to be expected. But, all

the same, I know what I do know, and that is like this: You are the man rightly named Caspar Austin, and I mean to—”

“Nonsense!”

A new actor on the stage spoke that word, and as the detective mechanically let eyes follow ears, he caught sight of a tall, trim-looking figure pressing forward from the front entrance, then recognized the elderly lawyer, Mallory Denport.

Instinctively the interested spectators gave way for his passage, and as Mr. Denport came into the little cleared space, he repeated:

“Nonsense, I say! This man is not Caspar Austin.”

A hotly fierce light leaped into the gray eyes of the detective, and in almost savage tones he spoke, shaking that poster in front of the lawyer by way of further emphasis:

“This man is Caspar Austin, and you said as much your own self! I heard you, and now—”

“You heard me call him Jasper Austin, sir,” coolly interrupted Mallory Denport, “and that is different as day is from night. This reward is offered for Caspar Austin, as all may see who can read. And so I repeat: Nonsense, sir!”

Sagebrush Sandy was leaning lightly upon the counter, smiling as one who held only a passing interest in the dispute, certainly far less disturbed in outward seeming than either of the two men nearest his present condition.

“Don’t fall to clapperclawing, gentlemen,” he said, at this juncture. “Of course it’s all a nasty mistake for which Mr. Eades will frankly and meekly apologize in due course, but for just now—”

“I’ll hold what I’ve got, and I’ve got—you!” savagely growled the detective, as he crumpled up that placard and thrust it back into his breast, again fetching forth his gun like a man who fully expected to find right speedy use for it.

The smile faded out of Sandy’s face at this, and he spoke, sternly:

“Don’t play fool, Arnold Eades, for you can’t improve upon nature. I’ve given you my parole. Put up that gun.”

“All right, sir, only—if this gent reckons he can run all over me in a rocky bluff which—”

Mallory Denport made an impatient gesture, turning to the man in irons as he spoke, sharply:

“Come, come; it’s surely time to end all such folly, so—tell this blundering idiot just what and just who you are, boy!”

“All right, sir. That’s dead easy,” lightly yielded the Sport; then, giving a nod to the detective as he added: “My rightful name is Alexander Sage. I’m quite frequently called Sagebrush Sandy, and sometimes the Sport at Large. I live by my wits principally, and so far have jogged along through life without sinning more heavily than being just a weenty bit smarter, brighter, sweeter, handsomer than any other fellow inside the charmed circle. So—there you have me, all in a lump, pardner!”

Just then the overthrown drunkard caused something of a stir by stirring himself, and naturally looking in that direction, Sagebrush Sandy caught sight of another burly shape, in whose right hand showed a revolver.

“Go easy, there, Dick Leach!” he called forth, sharply. “Better put up that barker, my pretty lad. Of course you wouldn’t even think of such a thing if you could help it, but still you might accidentally hurt somebody. So—put up that gun, Richard!”

The ruffian shrunk perceptibly at this, but obeyed without a murmur.

“Good enough, Dicky-bird! Now look to Honest Ike, and put the pair of you where you’ll take up less room. You’re out of place here.”

With remarkable docility Richard acted upon these hints, half dragging, half supporting the still bewildered giant,

both vanishing from view of those remaining inside the Red Light.

While this was being done, Mallory Denport was arguing with the Sport, seeking to win a frank admission from his lips, but which, right or wrong, Sagebrush Sandy was in no mood to grant.

“I draw the line at telling a not-so, you see, gentlemen,” was his light, almost scoffing response. “Not being Caspar Austin, why should I respond to that name? And if you, Mr. Eades, are arresting me as Caspar Austin—”

“I’m pinching you for—Captain Crook!”

Cries of mingled surprise and indignation broke from those who were near enough to catch these words, but again the Sport interposed to calm the excitement, which might easily become dangerous.

“Easy, all! Saying isn’t proving, and when it comes to fastening the brand of road-agent and toll-taker upon my back—”

“That’s the chance I’m running, all the same,” grimly cut in the detective. “If I’m wrong in my guess—”

“Captain Crook?” cried Mallory Denport, in stern disgust. “Why, you blessed idiot, that’s even worse than the other mistake! Captain Crook indeed! And he only yesterday—”

Just then came a new turn in the case, loud shouts and cries coming from outside the Red Light, among which could be distinguished:

“Captain Crook! Hang him! Run him up a tree! Death to the infernal scoundrel!”

Instinctively all eyes turned toward that quarter, detective gripping a gun more firmly, but Sport parting lips in a low, mocking laugh.

Mallory Denport showed greater agitation than either of the others, and hurriedly offered to go bail for the arrested man, but Sagebrush Sandy flatly declined to profit by that generous offer.

“No, no, Mr. Denport. I kick at that, even if Mr. Eades doesn’t.”

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTAIN CROOK’S NIGHT RAID.

The old lawyer flung hand toward the open door through which came such ominous sounds, then hurriedly spoke again:

“But, boy, can’t you understand what all that means? They’ll mob you unless—”

“Without it’s a bluff to take him and down me!” grimly suggested the detective, never more wholly on guard than at this moment.

“You’re foolish, Eades,” coolly cut in the prisoner, still maintaining that easy position, apparently indifferent as to the final outcome. “All that’s following the cue you gave, of course, and no doubt some of the Crook outfit is taking the lead, just to cover over their own tracks the more surely.”

With scarcely an exception those who had so far acted as spectators, taking no more active part than expressing their good will for the man accused, now turned away, eager to learn just what caused the racket out beneath the stairs, thus leaving the three men almost alone with each other.

Mallory Denport was deeply worried, the detective was grimly determined, while Sagebrush Sandy alone seemed pretty much his usual self.

Again the lawyer offered to be responsible for the prisoner, if those ones might be removed, and once again the sport refused the offer.

“Thanks, awfully, dear sir, but I’d rather not. This fellow has got me, now he must hold me as best he can. He’s damaged goods, and has got to pay full value when settling-day rolls ’round. You catch on, Eades?”

“That’s all right, my man, and I’ll do the hold-fast, never you worry over that,” grimly commented the detective, gun out and other hand closing upon the

arm nearest him as he added: "I've got fairly safe quarters prepared for your reception, captain, so—come!"

Sagebrush Sandy offered no resistance, yielding with a remarkably good grace, both men moving across to the doorway, with the troubled lawyer following close behind.

Just as they reached that opening, another storm of ominous hoots and yells burst upon them, and a bit later, rising clear over the main tumult came the cry:

"Hyar's a rope fer Cap'n Cook! Hang him—run him up a tree!"

Sagebrush Sandy gave just the ghost of a laugh at this, flashing a keen look out upon the starlit night, then saying:

"Really, sport, it begins to look as though you might have to earn that big pile of money, after all!"

Detective Eades proved himself made of good stuff, for he never flinched nor quailed, merely tightening his grip on man and gun, sternly speaking as he, too, took a comprehensive glance over the prospect ahead:

"So much the worse for you, captain. I'll hold my grip, whether you are dead or alive. I'll shoot mighty straight to save you, but if the worst should come—say your prayers!"

"That means you'll lay me down to sleep?"

"That means I'll give you death rather than liberty," coldly vowed the man-hunter, then lifting his voice to address that indistinctly seen gathering:

"Don't make a bad matter any worse, friends. I'm an officer of the law, acting well inside the law. I've arrested this man, regularly, and if I can't hold him I'll kill him!"

"Hang him an' we won't kick!"

"Hang him and we'll hang your hide on the fence!"

Almost in unison came those contrasting cries, and as he saw that there were at least two different factions present, Arnold Eades felt a bit more at ease, since one side would naturally foil the other.

Sagebrush Sandy called out clearly:

"Leave us two to worry out our little dispute by our lonesome, friends and neighbors. The right will come out on top, and that's what you're all pulling for, I feel assured. Now—I'm going with Mr. Eades. Don't get in the path, or somebody may get hurt."

A lull fell over the crowd, and the detective quickly took advantage of his chance, moving away from the Red Light and hastening as rapidly as he felt prudent toward the building which, in anticipation of this arrest, he had caused to be prepared for his living game.

Ugly cries and threats were not lacking, some directed against the prisoner, but by far the most aimed at his captor; but no serious difficulty was experienced in winning that dark refuge, and then Arnold Eades drew a full, free breath once more.

As previously intimated, the detective had made such arrangements as he felt might be advantageous in advance of that arrest, and had even hired men to act as guards over his prisoner until he could transfer him to safer quarters.

The empty shanty was found all right, and Sagebrush Sandy was put inside, but the guards were nowhere visible, and, still holding a pistol drawn for use in case of need, Eades stood at the front of the improvised jail, looking for the delinquents and listening to those far from agreeable sounds with which the town now seemed fairly alive.

Unless his ears deceived him, there were two rival factions afoot, one hardly less fierce than the other.

Loud cries were to be distinguished, some for hanging Captain Crook, and others in favor of the sport, who had been so unjustly arrested as that notorious law-breaker.

No one actually spoke in favor of the road-agent, but as he listened Arnold Eades felt fairly well assured that Cap-

tain Crook had no lack of warm if covert friends in the midst of all this disturbance.

Oddly enough, he was now alone, Mallory Denport having fallen back of his own accord, or else been hustled away by the excited crowd as the ironed sport was taken through the gathering.

At no great distance, however, the mob was holding forth, now and then coming to blows, with a stray shot as hint at possible battle; but no man knew better than Detective Eades how critical was his situation.

"It'll come rolling this way mighty soon," he muttered to himself, as he stood on guard there at the one door the shanty could boast. "How it'll pan out depends pretty much on which gang comes in front, I take it. If Crook's, good-bye captain! If the other—how much the better off will I be, either way?"

A grim and ugly conundrum, surely!

For perhaps a quarter of an hour longer Detective Eades stood on guard, ready to welcome friend or foe, while yonder wild uproar seemed to wax worse rather than to grow milder.

Then came a fierce outburst, hardly like what had gone before, and as he caught a startling yell of "fire," Eades almost unconsciously stepped further from the door, into the street to win a fairer view.

He saw a dull light creeping up, higher and higher, and knew that the crisis was surely at hand. A fire had started; that dreaded scourge to a mining town, where all buildings are tinder-boxes, and facilities for fighting fire are worse than naught.

Then—he caught a sound which warned him to turn in self-defense, but it was too late!

A heavy blow fell upon his head with sickening force, driving him face downward in the dust and sand, pistol flying out of his unnerved fingers without exploding as it struck the ground.

Then, as though that treacherous stroke was the signal for which they had been waiting, a small body of horsemen came charging that way, drawing rein close in front of the jail, then leaping from saddle to rush inside and fairly smother the startled sport.

Though taken so completely by surprise, Sagebrush Sandy put up as good a fight as might be expected, hampered as he was just then; but odds were entirely too heavy, and with a heavy blanket flung over his head and twisted about his shoulders, the sport was picked up by strong arms and hustled out of his prison.

The rest followed naturally enough.

The mob, or a goodly portion of it, at least, was heading that way with ominous yells and shouts, and seeing that swift action alone could avail them now, the night-raiders took just that.

Sagebrush Sandy was swung into a saddle, and a stout knave leaped up behind him, arms reaching around his middle to grip the reins. Two other fellows rode alongside, seeing that his balance was not lost, by accident or through intent, then the wild cry was uplifted:

"Cl'ar the way fer Cap'n Crook! Hy-yah, hy-yah! yip! yip! yip!"

Straight at the mob the reckless riders dashed, yelling and howling like veritable fiends, shooting as they came, though as a rule firing high and burning powder more for impression than for effect.

A bold dash, and a thoroughly successful one it proved.

Confused by sounds, shots and darkness, the mob gave way, as all such gatherings will before an organized force, and with wild yells and shrill laughter in fierce mockery the night-raiders vanished at the edge of town, bearing with them the Sport at Large.

All was over ere Arnold Eades recovered his senses, and pretty much all Skeleton Camp knew the truth; that the Crook outfit had carried off the man

arrested as Captain Crook; a fact which was surely turning popular sentiment against the Sport at Large.

If not the notorious road-agent, why take such long chances to rescue him?

Looking considerably the worse for his recent experience, with half-dried blood streaking his pale visage, Arnold Eades passed here and there, looking for what he failed to find.

Right or wrong, he believed that Dick Leach was at the bottom of all this fiasco, and if he had met that worthy trouble of an ugly sort would almost certainly have ensued.

But Richard had vanished, as completely as though such a being had never wasted earthly space, leaving never a trace behind him by which his going might be rightly read.

Eades found that two empty shanties had been set on fire; for that both were due to incendiaries no man could doubt, after all that had taken place.

Fortunately, there was little or no wind astir, and the buildings selected were fairly isolated, thus preventing any spread of the flames.

Knowing as they did that the town was doomed should a fire once get under fair headway, the citizens, almost without exception, had turned that way without caring for aught else, keeping the fires from spreading, but thus enabling the raiders to go scot free.

All this Detective Eades picked up before he found any one of those he was looking for, yet his anger was still fiercely burning when he came face to face with Mallory Denport.

The lawyer betrayed signs of more than ordinary emotion, but Arnold Eades checked him as he would have passed on, harshly crying out:

"Now, what have you got to say about it, old man?"

"About what?"

"That demon; that infernal double-face, of course! You stood up for him as not being Captain Crook—"

"If you mean Jasper Austin—"

"I mean the cursed fraud who's been figuring here as Sagebrush Sandy, of course. I know him, you know him, and the whole world shall soon know him for just what he is—"

"You are letting unreasoning passion run away with your better judgment, Mr. Eades," said the man of law, with forced calmness. "I tell you it is all an ugly mistake, and one which will be sorely regretted by yourself, as well as others."

"And I say that you are either an ass or a fraud!" harshly vowed the detective, shaking off the hand which touched his arm. "That devil is not what you say, and I know—"

"You are utterly mistaken, sir. He is my man, not yours," persisted the lawyer. "He is Jasper Austin, not Casper, nor yet—"

"He is Caspar Austin. I'll take him as Caspar Austin. I'll hang him as Caspar Austin—or lose my own life trying to tie that knot!"

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN CROOK AND HIS CAPTIVE.

One thing was beyond a reasonable doubt: Sagebrush Sandy was not a free-will actor in that midnight rush from jail through town to the foothills beyond.

For a man taken pretty much by surprise, with wrists ironed and arms well nigh helpless through that unyielding hampering, he made a good fight, if a brief one.

It seemed as though a round score of hands were gripping him wherever fingers could find hold, and when the heavy blanket was wound about his head and neck, nearly shutting off his wind entirely, the end came only too swiftly.

And so, comparatively helpless to fight or to remonstrate, the Sport was carried out of Skeleton Camp amid an uproar fit to celebrate a pandemoniac holiday.

With ugly persistence came the thought

how doubly he would be damned in the estimation of all honest citizens by this very rescue.

He had been publicly accused of being the notorious road-agent, and placed under arrest as such by an officer of the law.

Now, carried away in howling triumph by a gang of midnight raiders, who seemingly were members of that lawless band, what other belief was left open for the public to entertain?

Fiercely Sagebrush struggled at these thoughts, striving all he knew how to break away, even at the risk of breaking neck or limbs through a fall while racing thus; but strong hands held him fairly steady in the saddle, and that thick muffler fairly drowned his cries and curses.

Thanks to the two fires, now blazing up fiercely, lending the impression of a far more dangerous crisis than after events justified, no concerted chase was given, nor much of any opposition offered that dash into and out of town.

Then, after leaving Skeleton Camp well to the rear, although the ruddy reflection of the fires were visible enough, and faint echoes of excited shouts could be caught by a keen ear, a brief halt was called.

One who appeared to be the prime spirit in that audacious raid moved closer to the doubly laden horse, and quickly took away the muffler, laughing a bit as the Sport caught his breath sharply, deeply.

"Drink it in, pardner," spoke the leader, face hidden behind a mask of dark cloth, but tones sounding fairly familiar. "That's one of the mighty few things you find free out in this blessed country; free as air! Drink hearty!"

Sagebrush Sandy gave a sudden lurch in that direction, his ironed hands flying up and out in a desperate grasp at that mask; but, just as though looking for some such movement, the outlaw ducked and drew back, with a little laugh of grim pleasantry.

"I'm so awfully bashful, don't you know, pardner? Don't ask me to expose my beautiful mug until—"

"I know—you are—"

"Don't give it away, then, please."

Still in seeming mockery, yet with a cadence which might be interpreted as a covert plea, for all. And so, after a brief hesitation, Sagebrush Sandy straightened up once more in the saddle.

"If you are afraid or ashamed—"

"Neither one nor the other, I assure you; merely bashful. I was born that way, and have been vainly fighting the cruel drawback ever since. If you only knew—but that part can wait."

"Leaving out the graceful part of it, pardner, I reckon you could make the rest of the journey a bit more comfortably if less crowded, so—fix her up, lads!"

Apparently the raiders had been instructed in advance, for no further orders were necessary.

The fellow *en croupe* slipped back over the nag's haunches, to deftly draw a noose around the Sport's ankles and secure them beneath the animal's belly, doing this before Sagebrush Sandy could divine just what the next step was to be.

A second bit of rope was passed about his middle, and then knotted around the high Spanish saddlebow, making all secure and rendering it impossible for the prisoner to either fall or to cast himself off the horse.

Knowing how utterly helpless he was, Alexander showed a fair modicum of good sense by quietly submitting to what he could not prevent, then took the reins which were thrust into his hands.

"You can make believe, pardner," lightly said the head raider while doing this. "It'll be something to hang fast to, anyway."

"Where are you going to take me, if I may ask?"

"Along with us, of course. Where could you find better company?"

"Anywhere else; in any penitentiary, for that matter!" bitterly retorted the

Sport, yet making no actual rebellion as his horse was set in motion and that journey resumed.

"There's gratitude for you, I don't think!" cried the raider, with feigned indignation. "And we risking our own blessed necks to save you stretching hemp!"

"Better that than like this. 'Twould soon be over, while now—so long as I live 'twill be breathing under shadow of that same rope!"

Sage spoke with unmasked bitterness, but his chief captor laughed in mockery.

"Come, come, old fellow; you really don't know what's good for you, if you talk in that strain."

"I know that you've damned me past redemption in the eyes of all honest men," moodily retorted the captive Sport. "Don't rub it in too deep, I warn you. Give me a chance; a bit of a breathing spell, or I may say something which—"

"All right, my dear fellow," quickly interposed the raider. "Anything to keep peace in the family, so—quiet reigns!"

The little cavalcade pressed on through the night, for some little distance sticking to the stage-road leading to Dirigo, but then turning more to the north, where a cross-valley offered a favorable route.

Then, one by one, or in pairs, the company melted away, almost without the Sport noticing the fact, until only three men remained, one of whom was surely Captain Crook, or, at least, he who had played that part when the double hold-up took place.

Long before this Skeleton Camp had been lost to sight, and feeling fairly confident that no pursuit would be attempted before the dawning of day, Captain Crook showed no particular haste in crowding their retreat.

Then, when he deemed time sufficient had been granted for the prisoner to fit himself to the present condition of affairs, Captain Crook pressed a bit closer to the Sport, speaking lightly:

"Well, pardner, your loss promises to be our gain. Twenty thousand dollars are not to be picked up every day in the year, which will in part account for my lack of tears. Ha! ha! ha!"

"You play your part well, but—"

"I always do, don't you know? And this—well, 'tis a speculation surely worth trying on, if only for a change from regular toll-taking. And it'll make no particular difference to you, don't you see? What matter who runs you in and claims the reward, since it had to come that way?"

"What are you trying to make me out, anyway?"

"What does the placard dub you? Oh, yes—Caspar Austin! What a gay old high-roller you must have been, pardner, to have such a weighty tail tacked on to your kite!"

Sagebrush Sandy gave a harsh growl at this unwelcome mockery, hot words rising in his throat, only to be smothered and swallowed by a powerful effort of will. Then he said, hoarsely:

"Don't rub it in too deep. You know what that reward was offered for, without my telling."

"I know? Do you take me for a clairvoyant?"

"What need of that? I know what and who you are, and—"

"Come, come!" with swift impatience as he spurred his own steed, at the same time leaning far enough across to slap haunch of the animal bearing the Sport. "We're wasting valuable time in idle chatter. At this rate we'll never get there!"

Sagebrush Sandy took the hint, and for a number of minutes no more was said on either side.

Apparently Captain Crook preferred keeping that particular secret from full knowledge of the fellows who served as escort, and Sagebrush Sandy was in no especial haste to enlighten them further. Taking advantage of a narrowing in

the trail they were following, where their escort fell naturally to the rear, Sage spoke in stern warning, which thinly masked a real anxiety:

"It's ill playing with edged tools, captain! Arnold Eades is a bad dose of medicine, and while you may have foolish him right now, be sure he'll come again unless—"

"What?"

"You let him dead?"

A low, reckless chuckle greeted this almost whispered query, but then the night-rider made answer:

"Well, hardly that. Merely cracked the rascal's crown, but he'll catch heap sight worse than that unless he accepts the gentle hint."

"He'll never turn tail while a bite is left in him. He's just that near to being a bulldog."

"Not very complimentary, are you? Then, if it's a fair question, why in blazes did you chip in to save him from getting a final dose yesterday? Tell me that, please."

"On principle."

"How so?"

"As being the under dog in an unequal fight, of course," came the response, in something more like the customary off-hand manner of the Sport at Large. "And now—let Captain Crook take warning—"

"Bah!" cried the road-agent, with a short, reckless laugh. "Thank you for nothing, Sagebrush Sandy! My hand has kept my head, so far, and as for the future—well, what's the matter with turning over a new leaf and starting in afresh?"

"Rather late in the day for such talk, don't you reckon?"

"What is the tender housewife's motto: never too late to mend? And such an opening as the one I have in my mind's eye, Horatio, very seldom stumbles up against a poor devil who has been fighting crooked luck almost from his birth!"

"You mean—just what?"

"Business, with a fair sprinkling of sentiment to make the morsel slip down the more readily," declared the night-rider, with a chuckling laugh which was far from pleasant to hear.

"For one thing, this running an open toll-gate isn't nearly what it used to be, nor quite what it's cracked up to be even yet. Look at the fizzle of yesterday, for instance!"

"Then you admit—"

"That I turned the little trick? Certainly, since none save your worshipful self can catch my confession," mockingly answered the road-agent, before the query could be fairly placed. "Of course you wouldn't think of giving me away?"

"If I only knew—oh, what cursed luck lies in it!"

"Better laugh than weep, particularly as I've just saved you from going up a tree without the trouble of climbing! And as for myself—well, the bare prospect tickles me half to death!"

"I'll admit it's hard for an old dog to learn new tricks, but—just think what glorious inducements are being offered me!"

"What do you mean? What manner of inducements?"

"Well, for instance: Mighty fine chunk of a girl, that Milly Blythe, and she seems to want a running-mate powerful badly, too!"

"Careful, you brute!" sternly said Sage, at this. "Surely it's bad enough to be a criminal without becoming a cur as well?"

CHAPTER XVI.

BORN TO BE BAD.

As he spoke, the sport lifted his manacled hands with a passionate gesture which might easily be mistaken for a coming blow.

Possibly Captain Crook so interpreted it, for he flung up an arm as though to guard face or head, swaying in his saddle and jerking horse a bit further away.

Short cries came from the two knaves acting as escort as they took note of this, and with one accord they crowded closer to hold or to save, but a stern word from the lips of their leader quickly checked action.

"All right, my lads; we're all serene and twice as lovely, so you needn't break a trace or split a hame."

For all that, the road-agent apparently deemed it wisest to let the conversation lag for the present, pushing on still further to the north, plunging still deeper into the hills, following no regular trail yet evidently at no loss which crook to take or curve to follow in order to make the greatest distance in the least time.

On his part, Sagebrush Sandy seemed willing enough to give tongue a rest, head drooping dejectedly, like one whose spirit is fairly crushed or soul turned sick within him.

And so the retreat was pressed for mile after mile, no halt being made for aught until the end of that journey was reached, to all seeming.

A lonely spot lying deep among the rugged hills, with nothing in sight to indicate a permanent camp or place of refuge, and with half-wondering, half-bewildered air, the sport glanced around—he had no time granted him for any more.

With a deft motion the heavy blanket was flung over his head, shutting out all light and nearly all sound as well.

Strong arms held him firmly in spite of instinctive struggles, and a voice which sounded faint and from far away came to his ears:

"Don't play the fool, pardner. You're not going to be hurt—yet! Merely a pledge that you'll not publish our street and number to all the world in your next bulletin: understand?"

Then followed a bit of puzzling locomotion, with many bends and turns and intricate figuring, all calculated to thoroughly confuse the brain of one who might otherwise be keeping a mental map of their travel for future use.

As it happened, however, this was a needless precaution on the part of Captain Crook, for Sagebrush Sandy had been giving all his thoughts and powers to other matters of far greater importance, and had hardly the ghost of an idea as to just what quarter of the globe he had been transported to by his captors.

After considerable of this by-play, the sport was set free from the saddle, helped to find firm footing, then marched between the two guards over a bit of rough ground, to finally enter what appeared to be a cavern or other subterranean retreat.

Like one who realized there was no use in kicking against the pricks, Sandy obeyed each impulse lent him, nor did he offer to move when left briefly to himself, although that heavy muffler was fairly smothering to one so accustomed to free air and full liberty.

He caught indistinct sounds as of low talking not far away, then a dim glow seemed to penetrate his hoodwink, after which hands removed the blanket and he saw that masked shape standing before him.

"Well, sport, this is scarcely palatial, but surely it's a heap-sight better than dancing on nothing where the night-winds can sing love-songs through both ears: not?"

Sage made no immediate answer, gazing steadily at those eyes which shone brightly through the holes in the cloth, thanks to the oil-lamp which was fastened to a point of rock just above the level of their heads.

His strong hands clenched tightly, the movement causing a curious sound to come from the irons about his wrists.

Captain Crook gave a bit of a start at this, instinctively recoiling as though in anticipation of a blow with the handcuffs.

He rallied as swiftly, forcing a brief laugh as he spoke:

"If that's a hint, sport, it's wasted. For one thing, I don't know how to unlock the bracelets, and for another—would it be wise, with you in your present state of enthusiasm?"

Sagebrush Sandy supplied the proof right then and there.

His manacled hands flew up and swept through the air with a force and swiftness which no man could have foiled without more warning. But that blow was arrested by himself just before it touched that cowed head, fingers unclosing and hands falling as their owner stepped back a pace, forcing a laugh which sounded strangely cold and harsh for the ordinarily genial, fun-loving Sport at Large.

Captain Crook recoiled with a broken cry, one arm flying up to guard his head, the other hand jerking pistol from belt.

"I'll blow you through it—"

"Bah! Are you fool as well as knave, Caspar? If I wanted to harm you, how easy! I merely wished to show you that I'm not yielding through either fear or impotence, but simply because—brother!"

Captain Crook replaced his gun, then tore off the mask which had so far completely hidden his face, and as he turned more squarely toward the lamplight a brief, harsh laugh came through his lips.

It was the same face which had been shown to Milly Blythe when the Dirigo stage was being held up; a face which surely was that of one far less than middle-age, yet past early youth; covered almost to the eyes with a thick growth of beard, yet bearing a remarkably strong resemblance to that of the Sport at Large.

Sagebrush Sandy saw this, and turned a shade or two paler as belief turned to conviction.

For some time past he had feared as much, and of recent days had felt almost certain that in Captain Crook he was doomed to find the one for whom he had been seeking for years: the twin brother of whom Mallory Denport had spoken.

And now, as confirmation of those doubts and fears seemed perfect, he turned faint and felt sick at heart.

Up to this very hour he had clung to his earliest conviction that his twin brother was a victim of circumstances: was blackened only in seeming: was wholly innocent of actual crime or transgressions against the law.

"Brother! Caspar—oh, my poor, lost brother!"

Brokenly came the words, and with them ironed hands went forth as though yearning to clasp that brother to an aching heart.

But the road-agent stepped back as far, shaking head and giving a brief laugh of heartless mockery, then speaking:

"No, no, my pretty lad! I'm fond of hugging and kissing, but I draw the line at one of my own gender; yes, I do, now! If you were Milly Blythe I'd meet you on the level, if not upon the square; but now—"

"Stop!" cried Sagebrush Sandy, lifting his hampered hands in passionate gesture. "I know you are merely fooling, Caspar, but—it hurts me, all the same! It hurts—and hurts me badly!"

"Oh, come off the perch!"

"Ever since I knew—ever since the day word first reached me of that awful affair, Caspar, I've lived and worked, hoped and fought for that one end alone; to clear your name and fame before all the world! To find and fetch you back to face down your lying accusers to their own confusion and eternal shame!"

His voice choked and he could not speak the words struggling for utterance. Tears dimmed those big brown eyes, and that broad bosom was heaving with the pent-up storm of intense emotion.

But no like response came from the road-agent. He laughed again as though

seeing but a mocking jest in it all, and as the sport once more reached forth his trembling hands for a brotherly clasp, he fell back, shaking head and speaking quickly:

"No, no, lad; I can't slobber, even if I felt like trying."

"Don't you know me, brother? Oh, Caspar—is this the way you meet and greet your brother?"

"Augh! That makes me all over tired! A sport? You? No, no, Sandy; evidently you're toting the wrong sign-board: parson instead of sport!"

"Caspar, how can you—is this really my twin brother?"

"Well, I don't know but that I might as well admit so much, Jap," answered Captain Crook, after a slight hesitation. "If I should conclude that 'twas a mistaken move, nothing easier than to take it all back, you know. You haven't a witness to support your word, anyhow."

For a little space silence reigned. Sagebrush Sandy seemed dazed, almost crushed in spirit. This meeting was so different from the one he had pictured awake and seen in his dreams for many months gone by!

Through all his faith had held firm, his belief in the complete innocence of his twin brother remained unshaken, despite the terrible proof which was piled up against Caspar Austin.

Even now he would not yield to his doubts; even now he refused to believe that all this was more than a nightmare dream!

Something of this blind, dogged faith fell from his lips, although he could never have told just what he said or how 'twas phrased; but once more the mocking chuckle of Captain Crook smote upon his ears, and again those bearded lips shaped words to the full as mocking.

"It's mighty hard work mending a bad egg, Jasper, and the less labor you expend in that direction the better profit you'll get out of your day's labor. So—since you're dead-set on retrieving the name and fame of the Austins—this:

"Take holy orders, couple on to a buxom wife, then go to work on gospel lines: multiply, and see that each and every young one is brought up in the correct manner!"

Sagebrush Sandy recoiled as from a cruel blow, but quickly rallied.

That brutal mockery seemed to in goodly measure work a cure. At least it gave him the mental strength which he so sorely needed just then. And, standing almost proudly erect before his degenerate brother, the young man spoke in grave, steady, yet fairly tender tones:

"I love a pure and true-hearted woman, Caspar. I have loved her for years. I know she loved me in return, once. I try to hold faith that she loves me even yet."

"Meaning Cousin Milly, is it? Well, old lad, you show mighty good taste, anyway!" declared Captain Crook, airily.

"Wait, brother," steadily went on the other twin. "We were promised in marriage, and I looked forward to nothing dearer in life, but—you fell into sore trouble, and I took a solemn oath then and there to never marry or settle down in life until after I had cleared my brother from all suspicion, and brought him safely back to the old home."

Again a voice-break, and as that proud head dropped slightly, Captain Crook stepped forward, one hand coming forth to rest lightly upon a shoulder.

Sagebrush Sandy lifted head at this, and their eyes met. For some seconds 'twas eye to eye, then the road-agent spoke, in softened tones:

"Well, lad, after all, I—believe you are the pure quill and clean white; yes, I do, now!"

"I am," gravely said the manacled man, then adding: "And you, brother Caspar?"

"I? Blacker than Satan was ever painted!" cried the outlaw, with savage emphasis, drawing back to smite the air

with tightly clenched right hand. "I am your twin, safe enough, Jasper, but I can't see how that is possible, after all!"

"Brother—Caspar!"

"Stop! Don't touch me, fool! I am poison—worse than poison to such as you. You are white; white of hand and clean of soul! But I—I was born bad, and I have grown worse ever since!"

"Yes, I mean it; every word, Jasper. I am rotten to the core, and—"

"No, brother; I will not believe that, even from your lips!"

"I say yes, Jasper. And to prove it—I killed Horace Inchbald!"

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN CROOK'S BRILLIANT IDEA.

The Sport at Large shrunk away, shivering like one in an ague, his pale face only too plainly betraying the horror with which this deliberate avowal was received.

Very brief was that involuntary flinching; then he huskily cried:

"No, no; I will not believe that, even from your lips, Caspar! You are only joking with me. You never—I know you could not—"

Another harsh, reckless laugh cut his broken protestations short.

"That shows you're more fool than knave, Jasper. Come, old man; don't make me ashamed of the family record."

"Brother!"

"Yes, I suppose that much may be granted. I am your brother. Our mother was the same, and doubtless our father. But—right there all resemblance ceases, unless you've been a model of hypocrisy yourself!"

Those handcuffs creaked faintly as their wearer made a quick gesture, more in sorrow than in anger, however.

"Caspar, don't try to talk that way, I beg of you! If for nothing else, remember the mother who bore you, and—"

"Stop, you fool!" cried the outlaw, springing close enough to draw a hand roughly across those lips. "My mother? What respect or affection do I owe her? Who bequeathed to me this devil's own disposition? Whom could I have inherited my evil nature from, unless—mother, or from out father?"

Jasper Austin said nothing, standing there with head bowed and muscular figure shivering violently.

Until now he had held such perfect faith in the innocence of his twin, thinking that it needed but to find to clear before all the world. Now—he could not face the crushing truth, as yet.

That brief-lived passion over, and then Captain Crook actually seemed to glory in his own degradation, chuckling softly as he drew far enough away to lean in careless attitude against the rock wall beneath the suspended oil-lamp.

"Does that shock you beyond expression, brother mine? Why should it, pray, since the black brand falls upon my head alone? You are not included in the family curse. You are white, clean, honest, reputable in the eyes of the world. Only I—what matter?"

"You are—I know you are only joking, Caspar," spoke his twin, unsteadily. "I know you can't mean any of it all, but—don't! It hurts me—if you only knew how badly it hurts me, brother!"

"The bigger fool you, then," bluntly retorted Captain Crook, wholly unmoved by that appealing tone, that yearning gaze. "How can I make you catch on, Jasper? Surely I've put the naked truth into plain enough speech? For—sure as you're more than a foot high, the very worst you have heard, the very blackest you can believe, is nothing more than the bald-headed truth!"

"I killed Horace Inchbald. I never gave him the ghost of a chance for his life. If ever mortal man was murdered, that poor devil was 'Race Inchbald!'"

"Brother!"

"Bother! Don't crowd a good thing too mighty hard, Jap Austin, or you'll never live to regret it; for, brother or no brother, I can't abide an eternal croaker! So—

"And yet, don't you know?" his harsh tones suddenly softening and the ugly glow in his eyes growing less cruel. "Sometimes I fancy that all is not rotten; that, even yet, one might find a bit of clear stuff in my make-up, by careful sifting."

"I know—surely there is, there must be, brother!"

"Well, there might be, provided I had a chance as—now, for instance, think of that dainty little lady—Cousin Milly, in fact!"

Sagebrush Sandy shrunk visibly, catching breath as though in sudden pain. Just so might one look and act when having an alien finger laid rudely upon a raw sore.

If Captain Crook saw this he paid no heed, still leaning carelessly against the side-wall, speaking slowly, drawlingly, more as though in self-communion than to a chosen auditor.

"She hit me hard; hit me right where I lived! And that, too, before I could ever guess just who and what she might be. Then—with a woman of her calibre to help hold a fellow level—why not?"

"I never had a fair shake; never! I was born bad. The devil took full possession long before I knew how to resist, even if I wanted to. Took me, held me from crown to sole, from center to circumference!"

"No, no, brother! You are exaggerating surely! You are not—why do you sport so cruelly with my feelings, Caspar?"

"That would be sport! And yet—why not? Surely the devil couldn't come in where a woman like that held sway. Surely—at the very worst a fellow could live respectably, in outward semblance if nothing better!"

There was no room left for doubting just what turn the busy brain of Captain Crook was taking, and Sagebrush Sandy shivered anew. From the lips of any other man on earth such words would have roused a devil of hate and vengeance, but now—his twin brother!

Captain Crook laughed softly, rubbing hands together as though hugely enjoying his new diversion.

He surely took note of that flinching, and it brought a more mocking light to his eyes, a keener taunting to his unruly tongue.

"Does that notion sting you, Jasper? Does that make you long to wring my neck, and—look here, youngster!"

"What is it, Caspar?"

"How much of that guff was honest, a bit ago?"

"I don't—what is it you mean, brother?"

"You actually long to reform me, is it, lad?"

"Can you ask me that, Caspar?"

"Evidently, since that's exactly what I've been doing. All right. We'll take it for granted, then, and so—just how badly do you want to fetch that modern miracle to pass?"

Sagebrush Sandy wore a look of pain at that coarse, flippant manner, but then made quick answer in tones which not even that graceless villain could doubt for an instant.

"It is the dearest hope of my life, Caspar! There is nothing I would not be willing to do for—"

"Good enough! Just stick a pin right there, pardner, until we see how much is truth, how much empty wind."

"I have told you, brother—"

"Told me too much for easy swallowing, old man, if you want my private opinion publicly expressed. Stop!" throwing up a hand and checking that eager protest. "Wind is cheap, but when it comes to putting up the stuff, that's mighty sight different. So—like this:

"Now for the test. You say you like Milly Blythe, Jasper?"

"I love her, dearer far than life," declared the prisoner.

"Yes, but second to me, or you stand a self-convicted liar," coolly spoke the road-agent, with a brief-lived laugh. "And to prove one thing or the other

—here's the test. Swear that you will resign all claims on Cousin Milly in my favor—"

"Never!"

"I knew it, and the family black-sheep still finds congenial company!" mocked the outlaw, his tones once more harsh and metallic as he came away from the wall and more squarely confronted the twin in irons.

For a brief space he stood thus, closely and keenly scrutinizing the face before him; then taking on the same attitude the better to compare their persons from top to toe.

Sagebrush Sandy was too strongly agitated for demur, or for readily divining just what this curious movement might mean; but he was not left long in doubt.

Captain Crook gave a curt nod as of approval, then spoke again:

"Do you know, Jasper, I've caught an idea: really a brilliant idea, although you may not credit the marvel. I have, though, and—listen a bit, just for luck!"

"We were born twins, and, like the majority, always bore a strong resemblance to each other, outwardly at least. That resemblance still exists, so far as I can make out."

"Barring cut of hair and beard, you and I are still as alike as twin peas from the same pod, and with a little trimming up, I doubt if your dearest friend could separate us at a glance, if given the choice!"

"What do you mean, brother?"

"I'm just coming to that, Jasper, and if you don't say it's worth waiting for, just to hear, I'll eat my hat and turn deacon! Now—right here you have it, in delicious chunks!"

"You have wandered out to this wooden country, hunting for me, according to your own story. And Milly has come—looking for you!"

"Now, old man, what's to hinder my shoving you into a deep hole for keeps, and then stepping right into your shoes?"

"I don't—what do you mean, Caspar?"

Captain Crook laughed, briefly, softly, hands rubbing together as though with an excess of grim pleasure. His eyes fairly glowed, his lips curled back until Sandy could catch a glimpse of his strong teeth; one plugged with gold glimmering under the lamplight.

"What do I mean, is it, Jap? Business, no less! It's a bold game, and risky enough to make it well worth while playing it off on the world at large; yet, how simple of execution!"

"Say that you disappear forever from mortal ken. Or, better still! Say that you are made to stretch hemp before reputable witnesses as Captain Crook, road-agent, toll-taker, and thug in general."

"That could be arranged without serious difficulty, as even your dull comprehension must tell you. And then, with you safely disposed of after one of these two methods, what is to hinder my taking your place in life, stepping upon the stage of action as Sagebrush Sandy, the Sport at Large? Or even as Jasper Austin, the meek and moral twin?"

"Would you—could you do that?" asked the man in irons, his voice low and painfully strained through powerful emotion.

"Ay! I could do just that, and be cursed if I don't believe that is precisely what I will do, too!" declared Captain Crook, forcibly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MYSTERIOUSLY DELIVERED NOTE.

There was precious little sleeping done in Skeleton Camp after the bold dash made by Captain Crook and his merry knaves, for excitement ran high until the dawn of a new day brought a feeling of confidence which replaced the dread of incendiarism, so easily aroused in the heart and mind of those who live in a flimsily constructed mining town.

So far, no actual steps had been taken to follow the raiders, nor was it much better by the time the sun peeped over the hills lying toward the east.

Some men called for volunteers to take the trail without further delay, prepared to crowd the hunt to the bitter end. Many fierce threats were breathed, numerous vows were taken, but that was the limit.

For one thing, no man seemed to know just whither the enemy had retreated, or how to find them. For another, who was to take the lead?

It was so much easier to talk and gossip and pour forth curses upon the heads of all concerned in that audacious raid; and, above all, to damn the man they had so recently hailed with wild cheers as a hero, a model "chief."

For now three-fourths of Skeleton Camp believed Sagebrush Sandy to be the notorious outlaw and road-agent, Captain Crook, and his past life but the cunning mask to an infamous career.

Why else had the raiders taken such long chances to carry him away from captivity? What other motive would be powerful enough to make a few men dare the many?

No single man did more to foster this growing conviction than Arnold Eades, the detective.

As a matter of fact, he firmly believed what had been told him in confidence by Dick Leach, and what he now so persistently declared—that Sagebrush Sandy was only Captain Crook in another guise, while both were to be found in the fugitive assassin, Caspar Austin.

This latter point was not brought prominently to the front, although Eades felt convinced it was a fact. Enough that in securing the road-agent he would be "pinching" the murderer for whose production as Caspar Austin such a munificent reward was being offered.

"And he's worth just as much to me dead as living, and—a mighty sight more easily managed!" was the man-hunter's mental decision.

As for the old lawyer, Mallory Denport, he hardly knew just what to think, since reason and desire came so flatly in collision.

He felt almost positive that in Sagebrush Sandy he had recognized one of the Austin twins, but Jasper, not the fugitive from justice.

Still, thanks to the queer acting of the Sport at Large, he could not be certain, for that resemblance might deceive even his eyes, as well as those of Milly Blythe.

And so the day passed on and evening came once more.

Mallory Denport was just coming out of the supper-room, where he had taken a fair meal alone, Milly preferring to keep closely to her own room for the present.

"I say, stranger," spoke up a rough-clad fellow who looked like a prospector, or a miner in by no means steady work, tapping a shoulder by way of further notice. "Mebbe you don't know it, but 'pears mightily like some critter hed bin usin' of ye fer a bill-board. Nur it hain't jest Aprile fool day, nuther!"

Words and gesture called attention to a bit of white paper fastened with bent pin to the lawyer's coat, and, flushing as any man will under like circumstances, Mr. Denport plucked the thing away.

As he did so, he caught sight of pencil marks, and almost without thinking opened the paper further, to swiftly read the few lines:

"Come as soon as you can to meet me. Important. Will be on watch and ready to join when safe. The rocks lying east of town for choice. Shake off A. E. first, then come, else I must pay you a visit in town, and that might end in a necktie party!"

There was no signature appended, but Mr. Denport instinctively divined from whose hand came those hastily scrawled lines—none other than Jasper Austin, he felt fully assured.

Lifting his eyes, the lawyer caught sight of Arnold Eades keenly regarding him with glittering eyes, and, crumpling the paper up in hand, he made a swift

gesture, as though throwing it away, at the same time uttering a pettish protest against all such silly jests.

Not daring to wait and see if his suddenly conceived ruse had in reality deceived the detective, Mallory Denport passed on, presently going up stairs and joining his ward, Milly.

Leaving the chamber door partly open as the surest safeguard against possible eavesdroppers, Mr. Denport produced that crumpled paper, smoothing it out while briefly stating after what fashion the note had come into his possession, then giving it to the girl for perusal.

Milly quickly read the words written therein, then glanced up to the face of her guardian, with a perplexed expression upon her pretty countenance.

"What does it all mean, sir? I hardly understand what—"

"It is from Jasper, dear, and he wishes me to meet him outside of town, where we can talk without serious fear of interruption," quickly explained the lawyer.

"From Jasper?" echoed Milly, again scanning those lines. "But I don't—surely this isn't Jasper's writing?"

"Think not?"

"Surely not! There is hardly any resemblance, although—it is so hurriedly written that I can't make out all the words!"

"That's the very reason, my dear," declared Denport, with an unconscious air of relief as he caught at the probable explanation. "Jasper wrote in such haste—with knee for desk, no doubt—that it mars his handwrite. And then—who else could or would make such a request?"

"Unless—could it be possible that—Caspar?"

But the old lawyer laughed at the bare idea, and even Milly smiled faintly, it seemed so entirely out of all reason.

"No, no, my dear child," said Mr. Denport, smoothing the paper and carefully stowing it away in his memorandum book. "This is from Jasper, easily enough, and the only question remaining is—"

"I am going with you!" declared Milly, rising to her feet impulsively. "I must go! Jasper is—oh, if he should venture to come back here where so many evil-minded men are—"

"He surely wouldn't be so rash, dear child, so why worry?"

"But he said—he wrote—oh, I know he will come!" sobbed the girl, growing more powerfully agitated as she dwelt upon that contingency.

She had kept well to her own quarters, but still had heard enough from the outside to realize how terribly public sentiment was turning against the Sport at Large, whom she firmly believed was none other than her one-time betrothed, Jasper Austin.

Being even still better posted, Mallory Denport could more than sympathize with her fears, but he kept a cool head and clear brain, checking Milly as the girl made unsteady efforts to prepare herself for the venture, speaking soothingly, yet with an air of command the while.

"I am going to meet Jasper, Milly, but you must remain here. Nay, child, I say you must, if only for our loved one's own sake!"

He went on to repeat from memory what that note contained concerning Arnold Eades, hastily but graphically painting what might easily happen in case the detective should suspect the whole truth.

"And that he would surely do if you were to leave the house in my company, or even by yourself, dear," he added, holding the sobbing maiden and patting her head in fatherly fashion. "I'll have to dodge him myself, but that I can manage to do alone. With you along it would be simply impossible; can't you see that much, little girl?"

It was difficult to see, but with a few more arguments he made Milly admit the

justice of his claims. And then, promising to give Jasper her dearest love, since it could not be conveyed by herself, the lawyer left, his ward promising earnestly to remain within her chamber until he could return with full tidings from her lover.

Having paved the way so far, Mallory Denport fell to work with hidden ardor, outwardly calm and composed as though not even the shadow of care or worry rested upon his mind.

He passed down stairs and through the hotel office, smoking a cigar which "smelt to high heaven," but was the best money could procure there in Skeleton Camp, looking covertly for Arnold Eades.

To all appearances the detective had left the hotel, since he was nowhere to be found. Denport even asked after him as further precaution, but none there present seemed to know aught definite about the stranger who had sprung into such prominence in a day.

A bit uneasy at this vanishment, Mallory Denport left the hotel and strolled leisurely through the streets, turning now and then, passing into less populous streets and turning sundry corners expressly in order to force any shadower to show his hand or lose a trail; but with it all he never once glimpsed the man-hunter.

Keeping this play up until he was firmly convinced that Arnold Eades, no matter what his suspicions might be, was not dogging his footsteps, the lawyer finally headed more directly for the outlying rocks mentioned as a preferable rendezvous in that mysteriously delivered note.

He held never a doubt as to the person he would meet there among the rocks, yet his natural caution had warned him to go armed; and now, as he left the busier portion of the camp, Mallory Denport felt to make sure his revolver was handy and in good working order.

That took but a few moments, and then, with a final sweeping glance to the rear and on both flanks, which failed to show him aught suspicious, the old lawyer pushed boldly on, heading directly for the rocks, in such a manner that he would strike them at nearly the same spot where a former momentous interview had taken place.

The distance was not great, and Mr. Denport was a more than fair pedestrian. Just now, too, he was urged on by a powerful interest. And so in brief space he came to the first rocks, giving a bit of a start and exclamation as a dark figure suddenly rose up in front of him.

"Good-evening, Mr. Denport; glad to see you here so promptly on time," came a clear, mellow salute from that shape, which he instantly recognized as Jasper Austin.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MEETING UNDER THE STARS.

Although the moon did not rise until late, the air was perfectly clear and the stars shining brightly, affording light sufficient for all purposes, and recognition appeared to be mutual.

The younger man seemed less certain that no espial was being attempted, for his gaze passed beyond the lawyer, sweeping keenly over the comparatively level tract of open ground bordering that edge of Skeleton Camp, doubtless in search for enemies, either secret or open.

"It really is you, Jasper?"

"Sure, although I reckoned it wisest to wear a mask while in your company before. As for now—of course you got my note?"

"Yes. How was it conveyed?"

"I thought that might puzzle you a weenty bit," declared Austin, with a brief ehuckle, still searching the space beyond. "Thanks for your early response, Mr. Denport. And—Milly is well?"

"In all save mind, yes. She sends her best love, and I had to almost fight to keep her from coming with me. If you could only realize, Jasper, all that you

have made the dear child suffer since making that wild and foolish vow!"

"How could I have acted differently?" asked Austin, voice sounding moody if not actually despondent. "I knew Caspar never did that bloody deed, and as his brother—almost his second self—what other course was left open for me to take?"

"I fear—if Caspar was altogether guiltless—"

"Don't—pray don't!" huskily cried the younger man, lifting a hand which showed unsteady in the starlight. "Whatever else he may have become, since that awful night, driven by fate and circumstances, I can never forget that Caspar is my brother, my second self!"

Then, with an inviting gesture, Austin turned and stepped further back among those boulders, closely followed by the old lawyer.

When their shapes were more perfectly blended with their rugged surroundings from eyes which might range nearer the camp, the younger man turned again, facing his friend and speaking abruptly:

"I wonder that you came to me, sir! I marvel that you, in common with nearly all of the town, have not damned me as the blackest of imposters, the most devilish of all sinners!"

"I? Why should you think so harshly of me, Jasper?"

"Why should I not, then? Why should I stand branded right now with a title and career of which an unborn babe is not more guiltless?"

"You mean?"

"That I am branded as Captain Crook: dare you deny that, sir?"

"No, but—surely people have some slight excuse?" almost timidly ventured Mr. Denport. "When you recall how positively you were declared to be the outlaw, and—"

"By whom? By a treacherous man-fox who would any hour take his bible-oath that black was white, or vice versa! By Arnold Eades, whose business is earning blood-money, with or without warrant in truth!"

Mr. Denport said nothing, deeming it wisest not to probe that raw wound more deeply lest a sufficiently bad matter be made even worse.

"If you are the true-hearted friend you pretend—"

"Austin, you are cruel, to say the least?"

"Well, haven't I some slight excuse for looking at the world through sad-colored glasses?" asked the sport, with a forced laugh; then adding:

"Since you are a true-hearted friend, we'll amend it, then; I'll make the defense I'd scorn to offer others, yonder," with right hand outflinging toward the shadowy town.

"I was falsely accused, and only wished a chance to prove my innocence of wrong-doing in the face of the whole world! I might easily have struck my enemy down; I held his very life at my finger-tips from start to finish; but—did I?"

"No, thank heaven! And if you had only kept on as you begun—"

"Why didn't I, pray?" with sudden fierceness coming into his voice. "Because I was not given even the ghost of a show! Because I was pounced upon by nearly a dozen knaves and carried off, bodily, in irons!"

"Then you did not—it was not by your own will, Austin?"

"I swear it was wholly against my will, from start to finish!" came the swift response. "I would far rather have gone up a tree at the end of a rope than left town in such company! For now—don't I know it?"

"Already I'm branded as one of that infernal gang, if not Captain Crook himself! I doubt if there are a dozen persons in all Skeleton Camp who still hold firm faith in Sagebrush Sandy. And—Milly?"

"Would sooner doubt heaven than you, Jasper. She wished to hasten to you without longer delay. She sent her love—"

The Sport flung up a hand and half-averted his face, shrinking as a man might from a cruel blow. Then, in husky tones he spoke again:

"Stop—don't talk that way, I beg of you, sir!"

"Why should I not tell you the plain truth, Jasper? Surely—"

"If she only knew! If poor Milly could only realize—"

"What? You are innocent, you say? Then what else can matter to our little girl?"

"Oh, if that was all, but it is not! When she knows—what the rest of the world must learn now—that an indelible stain rests upon my name—"

That voice grew thick and the speaker's throat seemed to fairly choke up. And Mallory Denport, scarcely knowing what to dread, yet feeling assured that something was sadly out of gear, hurriedly spoke:

"Jasper, lad! What is the matter with you? Why are you so—surely there can be no fair foundation for such gloomy fears, man, dear?"

The sport shook off the hand which touched him, flinging back his head as hat came off, drawing in swift, full breaths. Then, like one fairly braced for the truth, he replaced his covering, speaking with more calmness.

"It's a bitter cup to drain, old friend, but the truth must come out in the end, and to you—listen, then!"

"The dearest hope of all my life has been blasted! You know of the solemn vow I took upon myself: to never cease trying until Caspar was found and his complete innocence made manifest to all the world?"

"Yes, Jasper, but surely you can't mean to say—"

"I must—what else can I do?"

"Then—you have learned something—something definite?" hesitatingly asked Mallory Denport, fairly a-tingle with curiosity, yet feeling obliged to hold emotion in check as far as possible.

The sport caught his breath, audibly. His muscular shape shivered as though the night air was penetrating to his very marrow. But then, as one who feels that the time has come for speaking the whole bitter truth, regardless of results, he said:

"Yes. I have learned that Captain Crook is Caspar Austin! And—even worse than that—I have learned that my twin brother actually shed the blood of Horace Inchbald!"

"No, no! Surely not—not that?"

"Yes," with gloomy decision. "I would never have given it credit, coming from any other lips, but when my brother himself confessed to the deed, what else could I do?"

"What? Surely not—oh, there must be some cruel mistake in all this!" cried the lawyer, moved far more than he himself would have deemed possible in calmer moments.

"I'd give nine-tenths of my life to feel sure of that, but—how can I even doubt the awful truth? He led that dash into town, and 'twas by his orders that I was carried away from prison—to suffer all the torments of the eternally damned!"

"My poor lad!"

But when Mallory Denport would have laid a soothing hand upon the sport's shoulder, 'twas evaded by a quick step, and the younger man spoke on, swiftly, gloomily, like one who finds a certain degree of comfort in probing his own rankling wounds.

"Yes. Captain Crook is none other than my twin, Caspar. He carried me far away from town, into the hills, and then, tearing off his mask, made all painfully clear to me, in spite of myself!"

"He admitted his guilt. He said that he murdered Horace Inchbald without giving him a show for his life, exactly as the story was told in the public prints."

"More than that: he seemed to take glory in damning himself still blacker, boasting of almost countless other crimes which he had committed since, even while affecting to justify himself by declaring he must have been dedicated to Satan's service before birth: that he was born bad, and had steadily grown worse ever since!"

"Poor Jasper! If he really said all this—"

"Would I admit as much, even to you, if 'twas not the bitter truth?"

"Of course not, Jasper, but—surely the poor lad knew not what he said? Surely he was not sane?"

"I've tried to think that same way, but all the facts are flatly against it," moodily declared the sport, with head drooping and muscles relaxed like one fairly in the clutches of dark despair. "It's hard to speak thus of a twin brother, but—would to high heaven he was mad!"

"He is—he surely must be crazy! Why would he admit so much, else? Surely, if such a black criminal—"

"A criminal so deeply dyed that discovery and arrest would mean a thousand-fold worse than simple death!" huskily muttered Austin. "For that would mean—expiation upon the public gallows!"

A brief period of silence during which both men seemed deep in thought, then Mallory Denport spoke, reluctantly:

"It is an ugly puzzle, surely, Jasper! You know—that will! The estate cannot be settled, nor the fortune fairly disposed of until Caspar appears in person, or is—proved dead past all doubting!"

Another silence, this time broken by the younger man.

"Now you begin to realize just how I am fixed, Mr. Denport: on the one hand love and peace, on the other—what can I do, sir?"

Before the old lawyer could make answer, a dark form sprung into view and a harsh-sounding cry broke upon the ears of the two men there.

"Throw up your hands, or I'll kill you, Caspar Austin!"

The voice of Arnold Eades, and each hand gripped a cocked revolver!

CHAPTER XX.

DETECTIVE EADES IN HARD LUCK.

In spite of the precautions taken by the two men at first meeting, this surprise was complete, and the first inkling either had of coming trouble lay in glimpsing that rising shape and hearing that stern cry of mingled warning and menace.

Mallory Denport shrunk visibly, checked from turning in actual flight only through coming sharply in contact with a gray boulder which held him stationary until he could fairly realize the situation; then he stood still, mechanically lifting his unarmed hands.

Although taken equally by surprise, the sport was swifter to rally, one keen glance showing him how surely the detective held the drop, and how certainly any attempt to immediately turn the tables would result in death or disability.

For, oddly enough those ominous words were still ringing in his ears: "Dead or alive!"

That one swift look, then the sport faced a bit more squarely his way, lifting hands with an easy grace even as he spoke:

"Touch lightly, pardner! Up hands it is, and if you don't—"

"Careful, you!" harshly warned the man-hunter, keeping the two men lined, as yet making no further advance, evidently deeming it best to reach a perfect understanding before coming to closer quarters. "I'm taking no long chances now, Caspar Austin."

"Easy, there! I'm not Caspar Austin, but—"

"You're good enough Caspar Austin for me," grimly declared the detective, unconsciously plagiarizing, no doubt. "And

so—steady, or I'll lay you out for the sexton!"

"Oh, if you put it that way!"

"Don't force me to put it any other way, Austin. You foolish me once, but you'll never play the same trick again. I've got you lined, and even by this light I can shoot to a hair; so don't—"

'Tis said that pride goes before a fall, and this proved to be but another instance of that ancient adage; for, just then, without sound or warning, one or more dark and dimly outlined shapes rose up from the rocks just behind the detective, and the loop of a lasso dropped fairly over his head and shoulders.

Arnold Eades had not the ghost of a suspicion as to what was coming, and hence made little or no resistance. Indeed, no chance was granted him.

No sooner had the lasso sped and settled, than strong hands closed the noose, at the same time jerking so heavily upon the rope that the detective was drawn endlong, giving a half-smothered cry of angry amaze, which was cut short as his head came in violent contact with one of those numerous bowlders.

That shock would have shattered the skull of any ordinary man, and, if nothing worse, it knocked the detective completely senseless.

His pistols flew out of his hands as he went awkwardly backward, one of them falling in a scrubby bush and doing no harm, the other falling upon a rock and exploding, the lead whizzing through a fold of the lawyer's coat, actually searing his skin over a rib, yet doing no material injury.

The sport gave a subdued cry as he witnessed the lasso-cast and saw how surely his enemy was thwarted once more, then made a half-turn to grasp Mallory Denport by an arm and check his flight, speaking sharply:

"Steady, sir! There is no longer danger unless—curse that gun!" as the revolver exploded, waking the ugly echoes for many rods around.

Right well he knew that the sound would startle the town, and almost beyond a doubt fetch numbers of curious citizens flocking in that direction, eager to learn the cause of such an alarm.

"Come!" he cried, tightening his grip and forcing the half-bewildered man of law away, close to where several dusky shapes were busied with the overthrown detective. "We've got to rack out o' this, unless we want to be put through a catechism such as—hurry, man, dear!"

Mallory Denport did "hurry," although 'twas more through the efforts of the sport than by his own volition.

"Fetch him with you, men!" said Austin, in passing, one glance showing him how completely Arnold Eades had been disposed of for the present.

"Bring him along, dead or alive! Hurry! If those fools at town—pick him up and make a hustle of it, I say!"

He spoke like one with supreme authority, and none of the men so addressed made reply or objection, merely catching up the limp and lifeless body, hurrying away under the twinkling stars, led by the sport, who still gripped the old gentleman firmly by an arm.

It was a hurried scramble for a minute or two, by no means lessened as cries and calls came floating on the night breeze from Skeleton Camp, plainly indicating that the shot had been heard, and was about to be investigated forthwith.

But the cover was favorable enough, and the night-lamps above too dimly burning for betraying their movements while surrounded by so many irregularly shaped rocks; and so, with no other trouble than that of picking their way and carrying such an awkward burden, the little company made their retreat good, shifting quarters sufficiently far to render it highly improbable that discovery would result.

Should the half-blind quest turn that way, what more easy than to change location again?

Shaken, ruffled in person and in temper, almost breathless from that hurried scramble, Mallory Denport finally shook off that grasp, pantingly speaking:

"I don't—such conduct is—how dare you, sir!"

"Hark!" at the same time gently shaking a shoulder as he turned the old gentleman to face that quarter, where shouts and cries were now arising in greater confusion. "Do you know what that means?"

"But—I haven't done aught which—"

"Of course not, and yet, what difference would that make, think you, were you and I caught over yonder with that fellow in our company?"

The sport nodded toward Arnold Eades, just being dumped upon the ground after his hasty removal from the immediate scene of his latest downfall.

Again Mallory Denport caught his breath, shrinking a bit as he muttered, huskily:

"I never—'tis awful—awful!"

Like one fearing a too loud outburst, the sport slipped an open palm across those lips, then spoke in grave tones:

"'Twas his neck or mine, Mr. Denport. Surely you can realize all that? Surely you know what it would mean if I were to submit to another arrest, and be run direct into yonder town?"

"But—killing!"

"He is not dead, don't you begin to think that way, sir," quickly assured the sport, reading that shuddering repulsion aright. "He's only knocked out for the minute, but I—what would have been my reward if he had won? The rope; no less!"

"You mean?"

"That if I was to be run in now, with public sentiment turning so powerfully against me, the citizens would make me climb a tree without the ghost of a doubt. And that—well, sir, I doubt if even my best friends would seriously advise me to display so great meekness and submission to the misrepresentatives of the law as all that comes to!"

"No, no: of course not, Jasper, but—murder!"

Again Austin gave earnest assurance that nothing of the sort could be claimed, and the words were not yet cold upon his lips when Arnold Eades began to rally, recovering from his fall and head-thump with truly marvelous rapidity.

"There!" muttered Austin, with grim relief. "Since you can't believe me, come over and see for yourself, Mr. Denport."

While speaking thus, the sport himself shifted position to suit, making a gesture which the men under his command readily interpreted.

Although the curious citizens were not coming uncomfortably nigh, evidently wholly at fault and rapidly losing their enthusiasm as naught was discovered to keep them warmed up, there might be danger of a yell or other alarm reaching thier ears, and thus causing further trouble.

Arnold Eades seemed to recover his scattered wits all at once, for he asked no blundering questions, made no incoherent remarks, getting at once down to business as he caught sight of the sport.

"You devil! I'll kill you! I'll never give you a show like—"

"That's enough! Gag him, you fellows," sternly ordered Austin, with an impatient gesture.

His men—roughly-clad and rougher-looking fellows they were, too—obeyed unhesitatingly, doing their work with a celerity and coolness which almost proclaimed them old hands at the business.

Mallory Denport took note of this fact, and the doubts which had already been born in his busy brain began to crystallize.

Surely this young man was Jasper Austin? Surely he could not have been so thoroughly befooled? For—what was it Milly said?

He recalled the description given by his ward of the face revealed to her eyes

when Captain Crook lifted his mask at the hold-up.

Surely the twain could not be one? Surely this was Sagebrush Sandy, whom they both had recognized as the chivalrous twin, Jasper Austin?

These hopes and fears, doubts and beliefs were fighting a confused battle in the lawyer's brain when the sport turned again his way after Arnold Eades had been effectually silenced by a gag.

There was no unusual emotion to be traced in that strong, handsome face as Mallory Denport gazed anxiously into it as Austin came closer, and no alteration which could be marked in the tones with which the sport addressed the man of law.

"Well, old friend, I suppose you are wondering just why I begged you to grant me an interview out here beneath the stars? 'Tis easily told, though, and—right here you have it, sir!"

"I came here to-night to get you and Milly to go with me to see Caspar, where—"

"Never!" impulsively cried the old lawyer, shrinking away.

"Why not? What do you mean by—surely, old friend—"

"How can I trust you, sir, after all this? These men, this manner, the capture of that poor fellow who is—I begin to believe you are Caspar himself, rather than Jasper Austin!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A ONE-SIDED ARGUMENT.

Almost without their master's volition his lips syllabled these words, for only then did that ugly suspicion find birth in busy brain.

The sport forced a laugh which sounded harsh and unnatural, making as though 'twas an idle jest; but not so. Mallory Denport gazed like one half-fascinated into that strongly handsome countenance, slowly retreating until he came against a bowlder which checked his mechanical recoil.

Austin cast a quick look toward the fellows who had so effectively put a quietus upon the detective, then moving a bit nearer the man of law, like one who prefers their communication to be confined to themselves, spoke quickly, earnestly:

"You surely cannot mean what you say, sir! You recognized me, then, and now: am I not the same person?"

He removed his hat, turning face a bit upward as though to catch the starlight more evenly, bosom expanding and the whole man inviting a rigid examination.

Mallory Denport stared at him, eyes running over face and figure, then coming back to those large, lustrous eyes, velvety brown under the sun, but now like inky wells of light.

Surely this was Jasper Austin! And yet—

"These men: from whence do they come?" he asked, unsteadily.

"They are well known in town, sir, where they pass for prospectors or day-laborers in the mines," readily explained the sport, seemingly in no wise angered by that ugly suspicion. "I have had them hired for many months past, hoping thus to increase my chances of finding Caspar. You surely cannot find fault with me for that, Mr. Denport?"

"Then—I thought—"

Austin broke into a brief laugh which was plainly forced, probably to cover the intense chagrin which he could hardly help feeling.

"That they were members of the same unholy gang? That I was Captain Crook, playing yet another desperate game?"

"And—you are not?"

"Must I put it into so many words, sir?" with a touch of proud indignation, which was as swiftly smothered, then adding: "All right. I am not Captain Crook. These men are not road-agents or outlaws. I am not Caspar Austin, but his unhappy twin!"

"And now, Mr. Denport, let me make

a last appeal to you! Let me try and show how much—how awfully much—may hang upon your decision.

"I might have lied to you, or at least covered over the truth in good part, but I did neither. I told you fairly and squarely just how terribly my dearest hopes have been dashed, my firm belief shattered.

"You know, now, how deeply my poor brother has sinned, but I still cling to hope, and shall so keep faith while the breath of life remains in my body!"

"I don't see how you can hope any longer, Jasper," hesitatingly said the lawyer, his worst doubts appearing to fade away before that intensely earnest manner.

"I do—I must! 'Twould kill me to stop—how can I put it all into words, old friend? And so—listen to me, I beg, and have the pity which may you never stand in need of for yourself, Mallory Denport!"

"I can't help but know that Caspar is guilty, in part, at least, yet, even now I find it beyond me to take him at his own word. I believe that he was painting himself far blacker than the whole truth would justify, more to sicken me and put an end forever to my efforts in his behalf."

"If this is right, what more can you do?"

"Save him from still deeper degradation in spite of himself!" came the swiftly passionate response. "And with yourself and Milly to aid me in the last desperate struggle, sir, I believe Caspar may be—be saved to repent, if nothing more!"

"Whatever we can do, shall be done, of course," declared the lawyer, but with a lack of enthusiasm which certainly could not convey much comfort. "Still, I do not see just how we are to be of such service."

"You can do much—everything!" quickly assured Austin, reaching forth to catch and hold both of those thin hands. "Without your aid I am worse than impotent, but with Milly and yourself to back me up, I feel fairly confident the battle may be won, even now!"

"You must come with me: you and Milly shall go and face poor Caspar, when—"

"No, no," hastily cried the lawyer, shrinking away. "Anything in reason I'll agree to; any possible aid I'll lend, but it must be after a reasonable method, not like this crack-brained scheme of yours!"

"You mean—just what do you mean by 'in reason,' Mr. Denport?"

"That I'll be glad to meet Caspar at any reasonable time, in any reasonable place; but not now, nor as you seem to expect."

"It is now or never!" cried Austin, with tones almost fierce.

"Then it shall be never, sir!" quickly retorted Denport, freeing his hands by a swift jerk, recoiling a bit as though more than half anticipating an assault from the younger man.

Austin made a gesture, but it was one of fierce despair rather than of rage or menace.

"What are you afraid of, sir?" he asked, huskily.

"I am afraid—for my ward, not on my own account," answered Mr. Denport, firmly. "And, since you say there is no other alternative—"

"You have my solemn pledge of honor that no harm shall come to either Milly or yourself, old friend."

"If that was all, other objections might be overcome," admitted the lawyer. "But there is Caspar to take into consideration. By your own admission he is the notorious road-agent, Captain Crook, who robbed us in broad daylight, and has owned to at least one brutal murder—"

"Stop!" with hand flying up in protest. "'Tis my twin brother you are reviling, sir! And—Caspar loves me, still! He said 'twas truth; he promised me all I could ask, save that one thing: to

throw off all disguises and boldly face the world, to live and die as might happen!"

"He let me go free when I asked it. He swore by all mankind holds sacred to never more do evil, only—Milly—"

Again Mallory Denport interposed, speaking with resolution:

"No use, Jasper. Let me go back to the hotel and tell Milly just what has happened, and what you wish me to do, then I'll go with you, on trust. But not Milly; the girl shall never take any such risks."

The sport flung up a hand like one in utter desperation, turning away without speech, smothering sounds which might have been groans or curses. He passed over to where the men were holding guard over the now helpless detective, but did not linger there long.

He seemed rather fighting against himself than doing aught else. And then, as though the victory was fairly won, he came back, facing the lawyer with hands tightly clasped behind his back, gazing keenly, steadily into that strong face for a few seconds in perfect silence.

Mallory Denport answered that voiceless appeal by a reluctant shake of the head. His determination was not broken.

"You mean just that?" slowly asked the sport. "You positively refuse to grant my prayer: to go with me and save my twin brother?"

"I must refuse. For Milly's sake, not on my own account, though."

"Then—thank yourself for the rest!" cried the sport, passionately, as he flung up a hand by way of command.

The next instant strong arms were flung about the lawyer from behind, holding him impotent. Deft hands took away all weapons, then a muffler was thrown over his head and shoulders, held in place by a rope-loop, while he was lifted clear of the ground and hurried away through the night.

Not for a very great distance, however, after that unceremonious fashion, then Mr. Denport was swung upward to come down astride a saddle, where he was held in position by strong arms during a brisk if brief ride through the rocky tract.

Presently a halt was called, and the muffler was removed by the sport's hands, he forcing a brief laugh as he met those brightly glowing eyes.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Denport, but—you would have it like this, you know! I tried all I knew how to—"

"Thank heaven Milly is on her guard and fairly safe from you, you graceless villain!" cried the man of law, undauntedly, seeming even more cool and steady-nerved than he had been while at perfect liberty. "She is in no danger, there, for even you dare not venture into town!"

"Do you really think that way, my dear sir?"

"I know it! You would be hanged out of hand should you venture to show face within those limits! And—after this, I'm not sure but what such an ending would barely cover your merits, Jasper Austin!"

One with very thin skin might well have flinched from that bitter tone, but not so the sport. He laughed, seemingly with a rare sense of humor, then airily spoke in turn:

"Indeed! Where love leads, even a coward dare follow, and for a prize so dainty and rare as—but let that pass for the present."

The sport turned away from the lawyer, making a sign which was readily comprehended by his henchmen.

They quickly removed both captives from the saddles occupied, and as the detective came to earth, Austin stepped closer, touching Eades with toe of foot in contemptuous manner.

"You know what to do, lads," he said, while thus engaged. "Guard the gentlemen well, for they are worth keeping hold of. Keep your weather eyes peeled, and stand ready to act if necessary."

"And you, sir?" asked one of the guards.

"I've got a bit more business on hand, and must finish that before taking further action this way. Stop here, and wait for me. I'll come back shortly, and then—"

To all seeming Arnold Eades was bound past all chance of helping self or of injuring another, but now, without sound or warning, he sprung to his feet, bonds flying apart as though through a magical touch, and, with a wild-beast-like growl, he grappled with the sport, staggering him backward to trip over a loose stone, then both men falling heavily to earth in what might well prove a death-grapple.

CHAPTER XXII.

TAKING LONG CHANCES.

So sudden and unexpected was this fierce outbreak that the men who stood near were taken completely off guard, and before so much as a hand could be lifted to interfere, the two men went down together, wrestling and fighting, growling and cursing, looking more like a brace of ferocious brutes than human beings.

It was a brief but vicious struggle, and there is no telling just what the final outcome might have been had the rivals been left to themselves; but as the starlight was reflected from a bared blade, strong hands gripped arms and the combatants were torn violently apart.

Not until then was it seen whose hand gripped the ugly weapon, but as Austin staggered to his feet once more, his hand held a bit of polished steel, as yet undimmed by human blood.

Arnold Eades was quickly overpowered, now, since the sport had half-choked him to insensibility even during that brief-lived struggle.

This done, one of the men mumbled a sort of apology for so roughly handling their employer, but instead of showing anger, Austin declared his gratitude.

"I owe you more thanks than can be readily put into words, my good lads," he said, with grim earnestness in face and in voice. "I was red-hot, then, and would have drained the fool's heart too mighty sudden! But that would have been too easy a death for the wolf—far too easy!"

Hampered as he was, Mallory Denport had made no effort to escape by flight during this brief interlude, and satisfying himself on that point, Austin spoke again to his men:

"Don't give him a chance for another such scuffle, lads. Guard them both as though they were worth their weight in refined gold. Keep all ready to rack out in haste if necessary, but wait right here if you can do so without running too great risk."

"All right, boss; we'll be here when you want us, never worry."

"Thanks. I'll score it all up against you fellows. And now—you have your orders: carry them out to the letter."

"We will. If trouble should come, though?"

"Strike for home, as soon as you feel confident you've broken trail and shaken off all pursuit."

"All right," again said the fellow, then adding: "And you, sir?"

"I? Well, I'm going across yonder to see my girl," coolly answered the sport, brushing hat with a sleeve before putting it in place, then dusting garments and adjusting his ruffled plumage.

He paused for a moment in front of the lawyer, but if he meant to address Mallory Denport, his mind altered, for he passed on in silence.

Fortunately for his intentions, the alarm caused by that pistol-shot had fairly died away, the citizens drawn forth by the sound having retired; while the brief struggle between himself and the detective made no noise sufficient to call unwelcome notice that way.

Still, reckless though he assuredly was, Austin showed some regard for his

own safety, making a quarter-circuit before venturing to enter the town itself.

By doing this he felt fairly certain that no one was watching his movements, and slouching his hat to shade his face, he moved on with the careless air of one who had a perfect right to be abroad.

He had chosen to enter Skeleton Camp from the side near which Captain Crook had made his wild charge on the night before, and something like a smile came into the sport's face as he took note of a small, dark structure not far from that skirt.

This was the improvised jail to which Arnold Eades had consigned the man he placed under arrest as Caspar Austin, and from whence the Sport at Large had been so daringly swept by those reckless night-raiders.

To all seeming that bold dash, with its thrilling accompaniments, had been utterly forgotten by the inhabitants of Skeleton Camp. Nor was there any sign of the more recent stir. The town itself was quiet to a marvel for one containing so many turbulent if not actually lawless characters.

The sport took note of all this as he passed quietly along, hat slouched and shoulders hunched up, with head slightly craned forward, all combining to make a personage very unlike the erect, stalwart Sport at Large.

Although Mallory Denport had felt so positive that he would never dare venture into the very jaws of death, Austin had resolved to seek an interview with Milly Blythe, his cousin.

No man could better realize what peril such a venture meant, after all that had occurred since the coming to Skeleton Camp of Arnold Eades.

Before that accusation was made no man living could number a longer list of firm friends in Skeleton Camp than might Sagebrush Sandy; but now—how different all things were!

"It'd be like stirring up a nest of bald-hornets!" muttered the sport, as he passed along his way, grimly thinking over the chances for and against himself should discovery come that way. "Those who were first to cheer for Sandy would be first to damn him—up a tree!"

It betrayed no lack of nerve on the sport's part that he hesitated before approaching the hotel where Mallory Denport had taken rooms for himself and for his ward.

He merely wished to see for himself what state the town was in and to covertly feel its pulse ere making his last desperate cast for fate or fortune.

Not a little to his satisfaction, Austin found the town even more quiet and outwardly peaceful than customary.

"Fair enough on the outside," he mused while pursuing his investigations; "but below the surface—go 'way trouble! One shot, one yelp, one word would turn all this calm to turmoil, and then—well, they may kill, but they'll never hang!"

While muttering thus below his breath, the sport passed in front of the Red Light saloon, beneath whose roof Arnold Eades had made that daring arrest.

The front doors were swung wide, and a fair view could be obtained of the interior in passing, and the sport looked inside with a degree of interest which may be readily comprehended.

He saw that a fair number of patrons were there, but passed on without doing aught further to attract notice his way. So he thought; but he was quickly undeceived.

A pair of keen eyes had caught sight of that hat-shadowed face, and, recognizing it, as their owner felt fairly assured, prompt action was taken.

No alarm was made, but the owner of those eyes stepped quickly out of the saloon and followed after the sport, waiting until Austin had passed beyond that widening fan of clear lamplight before taking further action.

Then he sprung lightly forward, one hand going out to tap an arm as he spoke, in subdued tones:

"Hello, Sandy! Don't you reckon you are—steady, Sagebrush!"

The sport turned with a low cry, hand jerking forth knife and flying back for a deadly blow; but, as the fellow recoiled, recognition followed and the weapon was slowly lowered.

"What is it? What do you mean by—peace or war?" he demanded sternly, standing on guard the while.

"Peace, you bet!" came the prompt answer, one empty hand going up by way of emphasizing his friendly intentions.

"It's you, Frank Jellison?" asked the sport, doubtfully.

"Of course; eyes going back on you, sport?"

"Not exactly; but the bright light in yonder dazzled 'em a bit, I reckon," admitted Austin, putting his knife out of sight like one who feels there will be no further need of its services.

"That's the way I caught on, don't you know? I wasn't dead sure, though. Still, I felt pretty confident 'twas yourself, sport."

"If you had been sure, you would have alarmed the town, of course?" half-doubtfully asked the sport, as they slowly moved on in company.

"Come off! Why would I play dirt, man, dear?"

"Why not, when so many other fellows who were once ready to swear by me so readily caught up the howl for my life-blood when that fool of a detective clapped his irons on my wrists?"

There was a touch of ferocity in the sport's tones, and Jellison flinched a bit, though he rallied as swiftly, to speak in earnest tones:

"You're right, so far, Sagebrush. And—worse luck!—instead of dying out, that same sentiment has become stronger and even more dangerous, until—"

"Well?"

"It's not so easy to say, don't you know, sport?" with a short, nervous laugh which was plainly forced for the occasion as he glanced keenly around them on all sides.

"Of course, you never joined in with the back-biters, Jellison?"

"Would I be doing like this if I had, sport?" asked the other, with an injured tone. "And so—right here you have it, Sandy; rack out o' this the quickest you know how, for 'twill mean climbing a tree head-first if you're spotted inside town—sure!"

"It's all settled save hanging, then?"

"And that'll follow so mighty quick 'twould take an onion's breath clean away! And—I say, sport?"

"Well?"

"Of course, I'm not thinking of the reward that's offered for your taking; that cuts no ice with me! But, you know—well, I'm clean down to bed-rock, and if whisky was selling for a cent a barrel, I couldn't buy a weenty lick at the faucet; no, I couldn't, now!"

"And you want me to stake you, for your honesty, is it, Frank?" asked the sport, with a thinly veiled sneer, yet at the same time letting a hand slip into his pocket.

He believed this meant blackmail, but he had no idea of the truth—that still deeper treachery lurked beneath that pretense of friendship.

The next instant Jellison flung his arms about the sport, pinning both arms to his side, at the same time yelling at the top of his voice:

"Help! help! I've caught Captain Crook! Come—in a hurry!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"DON'T YOU KNOW ME, MILLY?"

Exerting every ounce of his strength, kicking fiercely at an ankle as he sought to trip and throw his living quarry, Frank Jellison yelled for help at the top of his voice.

The sport was taken terribly at a disadvantage; for, while far from feeling full faith in this man, he never anticipated such decided action.

Believing it was a bit of dirty black-

mailing, Austin deemed it only the part of wisdom to throw a sop to the rascal, if by yielding so far he might insure silence until his truly desperate venture was fairly ended.

But the instant he realized his peril, the sport met it boldly, resisting all efforts to cast him down, wrestling fiercely as only a strong man may who knows that his very existence depends upon victory.

Jellison had taken as full advantage as he knew how, springing almost to the rear of the sport as he caught hold, and was now fairly out of the way of butting head or clutching hands, thanks to the fierce grip with which his own arms were closed.

Here and there, bending and swaying, each fleeting second winning back a bit more of his really marvelous powers, Austin fought against such cruel odds, then—

Throwing every effort into the supreme struggle, he bent swiftly forward, yet with a peculiar side motion which brought Jellison fairly upon his broad back.

The traitor was lifted off his feet and then thrown bodily upward and forward, Austin casting himself desperately after, turning a somersault, to fall with crushing force fairly upon his antagonist.

The shock was a heavy one for both men, but Jellison suffered by far the worst, having further to go and catching the added weight of his intended victim; still, the senses were knocked out of neither, and again arose that cry for help!

Austin heard the alarm spreading; caught cries and shouts from startled citizens as they flocked out of doors in wild excitement; and, knowing that but one result could follow his capture, he took still more desperate measures for self-preservation.

With a fierce writhe and wrestle he tore himself nearly free from those partially paralyzed arms and hands, then—a bared blade flashed under the stars, to strike home!

A shrill cry of bitter agony!

A curse, and a second stroke!

Then one dark shape sprung away from that spot, leaving another behind it—the shape of a human being whose outflung limbs were quivering in death-agony, whose red life-blood was even so soon forming ugly pools and puddles there upon the dusty street!

A dizzy stagger as though his madly throbbing brain was failing him, then the sport rallied by a desperate effort, crouching lower and hurrying off to where the night-shadows lay deeper, still clutching the blade to which he owed his freedom, if not his life—a blade which no longer gleamed and flashed as its sides were turned toward yonder brightly twinkling stars!

The alarm was spreading rapidly. Already the streets were echoing with swift footfalls and hoarse calls as armed men flocked toward a common centre.

And then, ducking swiftly beneath a projecting shed-roof, the sport flattened close against the rude building, fairly holding his breath as several men ran past, yet clutching the weapon which had already sent one soul to its maker that night, ready to fight if fight he must.

Presently a loud shout gave warning that the body of Frank Jellison was discovered, and, knowing that all attention would be centered there for a time, Austin crept away from his refuge, making the most of that breathing spell.

Flashing keenly uneasy looks around in all directions, the sport stooped to thrust his knife hilt-deep in the sandy soil as the best method of cleansing its blade, then replacing the implement of death as he again moved on, muttering to himself:

"The cursed cur! Served him right, yet—well, what less could a fellow do: It meant the rope if caught, and he—devil greet him with open arms!"

Almost any man, after such a recep-

tion, would have made haste to get outside of the town; but not so the sport; he came to Skeleton Camp with a fixed purpose in view, and he doggedly held to that aim in spite of all.

When fairly outside of the immediate danger-line, Austin paused in dense shadow, looking back and bending his ear, the more correctly to read yonder sounds.

They told him plainly enough that Frank Jellison had been found, living or dead. If the latter, well and good; he surely deserved such an ending to his foul treachery; if the former—

"He'll swear 'twas Sagebrush Sandy who turned him sick, and that will set the whole camp on fire!" muttered the sport, as he listened and reasoned. "They'll rake the town through with a fine comb, but what they will make a haul, and then—climb a tree!"

Austin gave a low, vicious snarl as he drew this inevitable conclusion, but the same moment convinced him that the boldest course was also the safest, and without further delay he hurried away in the direction of the Grand Central, beneath whose roof he knew Milly Blythe had found shelter for the present.

Paying no further attention to the alarm behind him, which was growing louder and more general as moments passed by, Austin hurried along through the night until he came in sight of the hotel, then paused in the shadow to take what precautions he might against dangerous recognition.

Drawing a small package from a coat-pocket, he shook it out, then carefully fastened a false beard upon his face, effectually disguising his identity, unless he should be subjected to an examination under too clear a light.

With slouched hat and shambling manner the daring sport passed on, leisurely entering the hotel itself, seemingly a stranger in quest of lodging, which was his intended role in case he should be stopped and questioned by the landlord or any other person with authority to act.

But nothing of the sort took place.

Beyond a doubt the same alarm had reached this far, drawing all idlers away to the scene of that brief death-struggle; and as the sport was not obliged to pass through the hotel office and bar combined, he suffered no detention or inconvenience whatever.

Seeing that the little passage which communicated almost directly with the upper story by means of a stairway was clear, the sport entered just as though he owned a perfect right to so proceed, lightly and coolly mounting the stairs, until he won a fair view of the corridor which extended through the entire building.

An oil-lamp was bracketed at the head of the stairs, and a couple of like affairs marked the bare space beyond, affording light sufficient for all purposes, without making the corridor resemble a midday glory.

Pausing when his eyes rose above the level of the second floor, Austin made sure the corridor was unoccupied by any one who might interfere with his plans, then hastened on, feet giving forth only the faintest of sounds as he moved.

With scarcely a show of doubt or irresolution, the sport proceeded until before a closed door, through the keyhole in which came a narrow point of light; and then, with another keen look around, he closed hand to rap gently upon a panel.

A brief silence; then a low, startled voice made reply:

"What is wanted?"

The voice of a woman, and one which Austin instantly recognized, or his big brown eyes spoke falsely.

"A friend, with word from Mallory Denport, Miss Blythe," he said, bending to fetch his lips closer to the keyhole. "Open the door, please, for I must not linger until—Thanks!"

An agitated exclamation from within the chamber, then the sound of a nervous

hand at the lock, drew forth this word; but it was not premature, since, an instant later, the door swung partly open, revealing a more than fair face.

Milly Blythe, of course, and that she was powerfully agitated needed no saying; but as she caught sight of that bearded visage, so entirely different from what she anticipated, the maiden gave a low cry of doubt and affright, recoiling and attempting to close the chamber door.

This the sport foiled, by thrusting a foot into the closing crack, knee bending to force the barrier wider even, as he swiftly spoke:

"Your guardian sent me, and—Why, don't you know me, Milly?"

For the maiden was shrinking further away, lips parting as though to utter a shriek, which could scarcely fail to make a desperate matter far worse through arousing the entire establishment.

"It is—Caspar," faltered Milly, recognizing something familiar about voice, if not face and figure.

"No, darling; but—see!" quickly spoke the sport, removing his disguise and forcing a faint laugh as he pushed back the limp leaf of his felt hat.

That was the face of Sagebrush Sandy, fairly enough; but, instead of greeting him as a lover or even cousin, Milly shuddered and still shrunk away, giving a sharp cry as she caught sight of—what?

Red stains which could come from only one source, and which were not yet fairly dry; red stains which dyed right hand and wrist with hideous completeness!

The sport saw this at the same instant, and hastily explained it away, at the same time making an appealing gesture for silence on her part.

"'Tis nothing worse than—I knocked a rascal down who tried to assassinate me, darling! Don't cry out again. If you should—hark!"

From outside the hotel came truly ominous sounds—shouts and yells and curses most fierce, mingling with an occasional name or sentence which keen ears might rightly interpret.

"Death to Captain Crook! Hang him—kill Sagebrush Sandy!"

Milly Blythe gave a low cry as she caught these words, then gasped:

"Oh, Jasper, what is it—what does it all mean?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOT TIMES IN SKELETON CAMP.

This was hardly what the sport had hoped for, since he felt that cool argument would be safest, but now he made the best of altered conditions, reaching forth his hands as he spoke, passionately:

"It means that I am wrongfully accused of being Captain Crook, my darling! It means that I have risked the rope solely in hopes of once more seeing you, my true and only love! It means that—come, Milly!"

The maiden hesitated, inclined that way, yet instinctively shrinking from the hand so grimly dyed.

"Come, Milly!" repeated the sport, eagerly. "Come at once, or—"

His swift speech was cut short by a cry from one of the other chambers, and, mechanically turning that way, Austin caught sight of a face and figure dimly outlined in a partly opened doorway.

Apparently he was recognized by this person, for another sharp cry came from that direction, and as the door was slammed shut the words fairly rang throughout the entire building:

"Here! Sagebrush Sandy is here! Come and take him!"

Swift as thought itself, the sport jerked out a revolver as he glimpsed that face and figure, firing as his weapon flew to a level, but it was an aimless snap-shot, since the alarmed lodger was already jumping back out of sight and closing the barrier.

Report of gun was blended with that shrill shout, and even Austin was not certain his lead had found a fair bil-

let; but, as he listened, his doubts were solved directly against his hopes.

Again that frightened voice was yelling forth the alarm, now apparently through an opened window, judging from the altered sounds.

Until then the sport had hoped almost against hope that the alarm would not spread, or, if taken, would be so confused and ill-directed that by cool acting he might pass through the ordeal without serious trouble.

This was entirely different.

Plainly enough his face had been seen with sufficient distinctness for full identification, and at the rate yonder cur was yelping out at window, all Skeleton Camp would briefly know that the Sport at Large was once again within her walls.

And then—

Capture now would almost certainly mean death at the hands of an infuriated mob, if only because of Frank Jellison's killing.

All this the bold adventurer recognized in a single flash of thought, and at the same moment his course of action was fairly laid.

He had come to the hotel with one end in view: Milly Blythe must bear him company to yonder hills that very night!

So far, everything had worked contrary to his wishes, turning against rather than bending in his favor; but he never once despaired, snapping his strong teeth half-viciously as he sprung forward into the chamber occupied by his cousin.

Closing the door behind himself, Austin turned key in lock, at the same time speaking in swift, low tones:

"No crying aloud, Milly, on your life! If yonder demons should hit off my trail now it would almost surely mean a trip up a tree by the tight-rope route!"

Milly shrunk away from the sport, looking frightened half out of her wits, poor child.

Her wide eyes were fixed upon that red-dyed right hand, so terribly suggestive, so awfully close akin to the brand of Cain!

If Austin took note of this, he made no remark, apparently feeling that would make a bad matter worse.

He could hear that infernal hound still howling at the window, calling for help and an arrest; denouncing the Sport at Large, and begging for speedy aid in securing him.

Worse by far than that, he could hear wild shouts and cries coming from the front of the hotel, with heavy trampling sounds which only too plainly betokened a rush of excited men toward the higher regions.

"You hear all that, Milly?" he spoke, rapidly, at the same time winning the maiden's side and clasping her trembling hands within his own. "Come, my love! You surely will not fail me now, darling?"

Milly faltered something—just what she never knew, even if Austin correctly caught her meaning.

"Come, little one," he urged, almost fiercely, tightening his grasp on her hands and drawing her shrinking form closer to himself. "You must go with me, for—your guardian is waiting for you, out yonder, and I am—hark! You hear? Come, then, for upon your coming rests my one remaining hope, Milly!"

"I don't—I'm afraid!" sobbed the frightened maiden, trying to free her hands, but without success.

"Afraid? While I am with you, darling?" reproachfully cried the sport, then adding hurriedly: "Come! You must come, Milly! Without you my last hope dies away and—"

"Why—what can I do, Jasper?"

"What is beyond the power of any other mortal being—soften the hardened heart of our poor Caspar!" came the swift answer. "Come, Milly, darling. He laughs me to scorn, but you—hark!"

Those ominous sounds were steadily

growing louder, nearer, as though the deadly net was being surely closed about the branded sport.

Yells and shouts, curses and howls which sounded more akin to wild beasts than to aught human.

These sounds came from without the hotel for the most part, yet sufficient proof was given to convince both listeners that the building itself had been invaded, no doubt owing to those wild cries coming from the lodger across the way.

Milly shivered afresh and fairly moaned in her affright; but Austin ground a fierce oath between his teeth, his eyes glowing and face flushed as though with strong drink, looking like one who might front an army of enemies without daunt or flinching.

Heavy footsteps could be distinguished, and, even if not already in motion, none could doubt that a force was preparing for a charge upstairs in quest of the daring intruder.

"You hear that, Milly?" said Austin, hoarsely. "Come, my little girl! Denport is waiting just over yonder, and we need you—need you badly! Without your aid, all is lost, and Caspar will never—come, I implore you, sweetheart!

"To linger here longer means a shameful death for me, yet I cannot go without you to bear me company! Come, Milly, or—you will come?"

But the maiden shrunk from the ordeal, shivering, panting, scarcely able to articulate, so intensely was she frightened, so completely was she bewildered.

"Help!" again howled the lodger on the other side of the corridor. "Captain Crook is up here, and—come and take him! In Room 11! In No. 11! Come and—oh, hurry—hurry—hurry!"

If his heart had been even one-half as stout as his lungs were strong, that fellow might have captured the suspect without other aid, but evidently he was fairly beside himself with terrified excitement.

Still, he had taken correct note of the room number, and hearing that so distinctly repeated, Austin realized that he must waste no further time in parleying if he hoped to win clear from these perils.

Milly seemed fairly beside herself with fright now, and he saw how little use there was in making further appeals to her reason, or even to the love she felt for Jasper Austin; and as he caught the sound of heavy feet trampling upon the stairs yonder the sport took action.

"Come, Milly; you must come!" he harshly cried, throwing an arm about her waist and forcing her across to the window.

This was closed, although the weather was fairly warm, but so frail a barrier could not long bar his way.

Lifting a foot sufficiently high, Austin kicked the lower sash out, the glass shivering sharply, making noise sufficient to reach perilously far; but then was no time for caution.

"Quiet, girl," he said, harshly, as Milly cried out in his arms. "It is more than life, now! I'll hang like an egg-sucking cur if caught by those howling imps, back yonder, but—I'd rather die a thousand times than to leave you behind me, now! Come and—"

With a deft movement he shook off those frantically clinging hands and swung the maiden fairly through the open window, letting her hang downward as both strong hands gripped her around the waist.

Milly screamed aloud with renewed terror at this movement, and she had scarcely swung downward so as to fetch her full weight upon the arms of the sport than loud shouts came from the level below, and by the uncertain light Austin glimpsed a number of men hurrying that way.

A yellow glare briefly lit up the gloom below, and even before he heard the report of the revolver which sent it, Austin felt the wind of a bullet as it almost

grazed his temple, plucking sharply at a lock of his hair in passing.

He had gone too far to retreat now, for Milly was struggling in his grasp, and already her weight was drawing her through his hands.

He let go, the maiden shrieking wildly as she fell, though the distance was too slight to be really dangerous.

As he did this, the sport heard a heavy shock come to the chamber door, and fierce calls rung forth to add to the wild uproar. He knew that the frail barrier must quickly yield, and, preferring to take his chances out in the open, he gathered himself into a ball and jumped recklessly through the open window, shooting downward and striking the earth with awkward force, to rebound with cat-like elasticity.

"Hyar he is!" fairly roared a hoarse voice, as a rush was made in that direction. "Down him, mates! Don't let—ugh!"

For the sport was up and in action, left hand gripping a revolver and right his long-bladed knife, both weapons working swiftly, viciously, clearing a space about the desperate fighter with magical rapidity.

Shouts and cries turned to groans and curses as men reeled away in sickening agony or dropped limply to the ground, which was already showing ugly blotches of red; and then the sport glared about him as he won fairly free from the enemy, to catch a glimpse of Milly in flight, while other enemies were rushing his way, wild for vengeance.

His last chance seemed lost!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SPORT STICKS TO HIS KNITTING.

The cry uttered by poor, frightened Milly had served to draw attention that way, and the fierce fight which followed seemed to centre all at that one point.

Half-blinded by a savage blow which barely missed taking his full senses if not life with it, Austin glared around the moment he fought fairly clear of his enemies.

Precious little to lend him courage or give him hope!

Milly in scared flight, just vanishing around the corner of the hotel, while wildly excited men were rushing in that direction from (apparently) every quarter of the compass, shouting, yelling, threatening death and destruction to—now Captain Crook, then Sagebrush Sandy.

Fortunately for the sport, the light was dim in that immediate quarter, and where confusion reigned so complete, the enemy was naturally more at a loss than one who had but himself to care for.

They felt obliged to look and guard against harming friend rather than foe—man, but not so with the sport.

Realizing, then, that his one chance for life or liberty lay in breaking fairly away from Skeleton Camp, Austin crouched closer alongside the building, slipping to the right as swiftly as he might without calling notice too surely his way, then made a desperate break at his nearest enemies, shooting and carving as only a man utterly reckless can on occasion.

Again men reeled back or went plunging frantically to right or to left, more than one of them with worse cause than empty fright. Again the sport cleared his path of living obstacles, leaping away, himself as yet well-nigh unscathed, although his garments were rent and freshly stained with human blood.

A truly magnificent effort, which deserved success, if only for its utter fearlessness; then Austin won clear, darting swiftly away under the stars, giving vent to a laugh and shout combined—mockery and defiance all in one.

This would appear to be the very height of folly on its face, but the sport was playing a subtle as well as a bold game, and, having done quite sufficient to indicate his line of flight, again ducked low to dodge at an abrupt angle, taking

full advantage of such cover as offered to make good his escape.

Only a cool head and firm nerve could have planned or executed this under similar circumstances, for savage howls and furious threats thrilled the air as something of the bloody havoc wrought by the reckless adventurer became more widely known.

In making his double, Austin seemed about to rush fairly back into the clutches of the enemy, and thus insure his own death; for never a ray of mercy would be shown him now, should those itching hands ever close upon his person.

Instead, Austin slipped around the corner of the hotel, hurrying on like one of the many who had apparently lost head in that furious alarm and uproar.

He made a second turn just in time to see Milly Blythe run fairly into the arms of—whom?

A man, for certain, yet by that light the sport could not make out very much more. A man who caught the frightened girl in his arms and swung her clear of the ground, whirling away in rapid flight, much as a stout lad might have caught up a babe in rough frolic.

One scream, which was stifled by a deft hand almost in its birth, was all the evidence of fright or struggle made by the unfortunate maiden, and with a low, savage snarl the sport dashed on in swift pursuit, his knife drawn in readiness to add yet another red deed to the long score he had that evening run up for record.

'Twas no difficult matter for him to overhaul even an active fellow who was thus heavily burdened, and Austin was making a leap which might easily have cut short another life, when the kidnapper turned his head his way with a low cry of alarm, to be instantly recognized by the sport.

"You, Flickenger?" he exclaimed, eagerly, as he read the truth.

For this bold abductor was none other than one of the stout fellows who had already played an important part in that night's work.

"Holy grandpap!" cried the knave, with a full breath of intense relief, coming to a halt and letting grin replace grimace. "Ef I didn't think—skeered out o' plum' ten years' growth, boss!"

"And you've got—bless the lucky stars for so much!"

The sport pressed nearer, looking more closely into that pale and scared face, giving a subdued cry of joy as he recognized Milly Blythe.

Until now he had only hoped; this was glad conviction!

Fortunately for them, perhaps, this fresh fright had entirely robbed the poor girl of her senses, and she lay a limp burden across that strong arm, past making further trouble through struggling for liberty or crying aloud for help.

Satisfied on this point, and knowing that the danger was growing greater rather than less behind them, Austin shared that lovely burden, the two men hurrying away under the stars, aiming to win clear of town as rapidly as might be.

Since the disturbance was pretty well centred at and around the Grand Central, this proved to be an easier task than might be expected, no one seeming to see or to notice that hurrying shadow.

While the two men were acting thus, there was time for hasty explanations, by which the sport learned how Flickenger happened on the scene so opportunely.

Merely a bit of restless dare-devilism on his part, put in action by hearing the alarm raised over the wild yells for aid sent up by Frank Jellison as he grappled with the supposed Captain Crook, but for which violation of orders the fellow now received thanks instead of reproof or punishment.

Nothing happened to cause fresh trouble, and the two men bore Milly Blythe clear of town, hurrying as rapidly as their awkward burden would per-

mit, heading for the point of rocks where Mallory Denport had been left under guard for the time being.

This place was reached without trouble from outsiders, and a rapid interchange of signals made all secure.

The old lawyer almost instantly recognized his fair ward in that as yet insensible captive, and all his manhood rose in arms at this latest outrage.

A cry of indignation; then he broke away from the men who acted as guards, and only for prompt action taken by Austin himself, worse trouble might very easily have ensued.

A brief wrestle ended in the subjection of the elder man, and, holding him harmless, the sport sternly uttered:

"Don't make an awkward bit of business still worse, Mr. Denport, I beg of you. This is not—"

"Milly—my poor child!"

"Is safer with than without me, can't you see, sir?" came the swift interruption. "Listen to that racket back yonder; all the town is on fire, and a girl would be but a dainty plaything for those devils in human shape, after this!"

"But—we have done nothing which calls for punishment, while you are—what are you, in reality, sir?"

"Enough has been done this night to twist ropes or even worse for any who are so unlucky as to be caught up by yonder pack of ravening wolves," sternly broke in the sport, at the same time hurrying their preparations for the road as much as possible.

The bewildered lawyer still sought to protest, but that was no time for splitting hairs, and with a fierce oath he was bidden hold his hush under penalty of being gagged as well as bound.

Rapid work was being done, the two prisoners being prepared for the road as well as might be under existing circumstances.

Lawyer Denport was secured to a saddle with a long-armed guard up behind him, while another took charge of the maiden, now beginning to rally from the shock which produced syncope.

Again Mr. Denport ventured to protest against such treatment, more on account of his ward than through care for himself, and once again he was rudely checked by the sport.

"You'd make a sweet pickle of it all, wouldn't you, if given your own way? Listen!" as ominous sounds came floating across from Skeleton Camp. "Do you even begin to realize what all that amounts to?"

"If caught up now, we'd all pull hemp together, dead as well as living. Death alone wouldn't begin to be bad enough for us, and Milly—she would suffer far more than all the rest of us bunched together!"

"But—surely we have been guilty of no wrong-doing?"

A brief stare at this; then came a low, mocking laugh, followed after a bit by a startling speech.

"Well, old codger, I reckon it's pretty nigh time to come from under cover, so—right here you have it, straight from the shoulder!"

"I'm not Jasper, but Caspar! I'm not the Sunday-school boy, but the little rascal who preferred playing hookey and growing fat and colicky over stolen apples in their green stage. In still plainer words—oh, where's the odds?"

Even though he must have felt some such suspicion, after a vague, uncertain fashion, this revelation came with stunning force upon the old lawyer, and he could only gasp and stare, open-mouthed.

Again that reckless being laughed, seemingly pleased with the sensation he was creating on a small scale, then speaking further in tones too clear and distinct for possible mistaking:

"It's gospel truth I'm shoveling out for you in great chunks, old gentleman—truth in its jacket! I'm an Austin, safe enough, but the evil scion, rather than the model twin.

"If all goes well and we win fairly clear of this nasty little mix, I'll tell you just why and with what end in view I undertook to play this particular part; but for fear of wreck and ruin, this much:

"Blood has been shed, and I reckon more than one life lost, thanks to a mis-cue, back yonder, and as I don't want to brand my twin brother too deeply, this: I did it all; I, Caspar Austin, or—Captain Crook!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAPTAIN CROOK PRONOUNCES SENTENCE.

The morning following the hot experience at Skeleton Camp dawned bright and cheerful, but very little of all this could be told by those who shared the rather oppressive hospitality of Captain Crook and his men.

They had safely reached the subterranean retreat lying deep in the heart of the hills, to which the genuine Sport at Large had been conveyed on a former occasion, and where his identity was so coolly stolen by his evil-minded twin, Caspar.

Mallory Denport had been fairly stunned, almost stupefied, by the revelation made, and, as Milly Blythe was too seriously shaken in mind and body for making fresh trouble, little talk had marked the remainder of that night ride.

Now, day had come again, although it seemed always night there in the secret retreat, and Captain Crook had taken time to more carefully shape his plans for the immediate future.

Ever since learning about the vast fortune hanging in the balance, and discovering something further anent that queerly worded will of his eccentric uncle, Caspar Austin had determined upon one more audacious play, which should cast in the shade all other exploits which might rightfully be fastened upon his broad shoulders.

Without it was day, within it seemed night, black and cheerless save where artificial illumination served to in measure break the spell.

Lying upon cold and none too smooth rock, just at the edge of a narrow circle of light cast forth by a dingy oil-lamp, lay Arnold Eades, the detective who had fared so roughly at the hands of the man whom he had sworn to drag to the very foot of the gallows.

Squatted not far away, with back propped against the rock-wall, both hands clasped around his drawn-up knees and lips sucking lazily at the short stem of a foul wooden pipe, was one of the road-agents, now acting as special guard over the captive detective.

More than once Eades had attempted to begin a confab with this grum knave, hoping against hope that something beneficial to self might come of such action; but just as often did he fail.

A surly grunt, a muttered curse, then silence on his part. Only this could the pinioned detective win from that burly guardian, and as he had times almost past numbering striven in vain to burst or to loosen his bonds while lying in such a cramped position, he relapsed into gloomy silence.

He had abundant food for thought. He knew that his life was hardly worth the purchase. Captain Crook had made no bones about telling him that much.

Thus he lay helpless, brooding over recent events, seeing now where he had been at fault and just how he might have bettered his fortunes—an instance of the happy "hindsight" one hears so much about!

And yet, where had he been to blame, taking all things into consideration?

Thinking thus, again and again reviewing the past, Arnold Eades presently caught the faint sound of approaching footsteps, before his surly guard took note of that coming.

Shortly after came a low, peculiar whistle, at sound of which the outlaw quickly braced up, respectfully saluting

as his superior came in sight from out that utter darkness.

"All right here, Tinker's Dam?" asked Captain Crook, pausing at the outer edge of that dim light-circle. "Your charge is—"

"Heap sight safer than he is purty, you bet yer sweet life, cap'n," came the prompt response, that bushy beard parting in a broad grin.

"Hasn't been kicking, of course?"

"Waal, boss, not jest to say kickin', but—"

"Playing Satan on a high mount, eh?" with a low, mocking laugh as he came more fairly under the yellow light, nodding his head toward the helpless detective by way of cool salutation.

"Sorter, an' that's no lie," came the chuckling response. "Didn't make so durn mighty much out of it, nuther; he didn't!"

"Of course not. I knew my man when I placed you on guard, Tinker," politically cut in the chief of road-agents, then adding: "I'll relieve you for a little, old fellow, but you needn't go too far away. Just far enough so our chatter won't give you the headache; sabe that?"

"You bet!"

Showing no annoyance at this thinly veiled hint against playing eavesdropper, "Tinker's Dam" shuffled away through the darkness, vanishing in the same direction from whence Captain Crook had come, leaving the outlaw chieftain alone with his captive.

So far Arnold Eades had kept silence, although his gleaming eyes told plainly enough how fully his wits were upon the alert, and how closely he was taking note of what went on before him.

Captain Crook waited until those shuffling footsteps died wholly away, then stood for a brief space gazing down upon his prisoner, arms folded and face looking hard and pitiless.

Then he broke the silence, saying:

"Do you know what I'm thinking of right now, Mr. Eades?"

"Some fresh deviltry, no doubt," came the grim response, those eyes meeting his glowing gaze without the faintest trace of fear.

"You haven't curiosity enough to ask what, then?"

"Why should I? You'll tell me, fast enough, if it's anything evil; and good can't come out of you, even in semblance!"

Captain Crook laughed, softly, actually seeming pleased by this grim defiance. Still, his purpose was by no means shaken.

"Well, since you don't care to ask, reckon I'll have to divulge without an invitation. So—this really seems to be your lucky day, pardner, whether you think it or not."

Another pause, but this time the detective kept silence. Captain Crook smiled again, then spoke on:

"Of all the vile reptiles this globe was ever cursed with, a detective is by long odds the worst! They should be punished worse by far than ever wild Indian tortured his victims, and if I only had time, as I surely have the inclination, I'd take delicious delight in seeing that you paid full penalty for at least a round score of the cursed ilk!"

"As it is, this is your lucky day, Mr. Eades. Instead of death by torture—instead of dying each second of the full four-and-twenty hours—you must rest content with a speedy if not wholly painless ending to your mortal career."

"Now, have you nothing fresh to say for yourself?"

"Only that I'm sorry that I didn't kill you at sight," replied the undaunted detective, eyes glowing luridly. "Give me the free use of my limbs for just ten seconds, and I'll save the hangman a nasty job!"

If Captain Crook had come there with the expectation of breaking down that iron nerve, he now realized how worse than vain were all efforts in that direction, for he turned abruptly away, sound-

ing a shrill whistle which speedily brought Tinker's Dam and another ruffian hurrying to the spot.

"Take him, lads, and make a clean job of it. Send him over the dump, with knife in heart or bullet through brainpan; anyway, just so you make a clean and dead-sure job of it."

"You bet we jest will, boss!"

"See that you do. If you fail—well, I'll kill you both, like dogs! Now, you know what to expect in case of a fizzle: get to work!"

Like one who feels nothing further need be said, Captain Crook turned away, leaving the rest to his henchmen.

That trust was by no means misplaced, judging from the alacrity with which the two ruffians fell to work, jerking the detective to his feet as the bonds which had held his legs helpless came away under the keen edge of a knife; then hurrying him along through the dark to the scene of his intended execution.

Knowing how worse than useless would be any plea for mercy, any call for pity, Arnold Eades kept grim silence, but at every possible opportunity throwing all his remarkable strength against the bonds by which his arms were confined, hoping while life should linger.

He was taken out of the cavern under the broad light of noonday, encountering none other of the road-agents.

Stumbling clumsily, like one blinded by this sudden transition from darkness to light, at each forced step putting fierce strain upon his bonds, Arnold Eades was hurried on to the place elected for his last breath, his captors brutally joking and laughing over the unexpected treat.

The detective was not left long in doubt as to just what "the dump" might be, for the guards checked progress at the verge of a deep chasm, or wide crevice in the rocky hill, one swinging a rope as he formed a slip-noose, his mate more particularly looking after their captive.

"He's one o' them cussed critters which jest hones fer to make pore devils stretch hemp," quoth the amateur Jack Ketch, while at work, "an' so—we'll give him a dose o' his own medicine; eh, Tinker?"

"Ary way, jest so the job is good jobbed."

"An' 'twon't be ary much fun 'thout the durn cuss does some tall kickin', so—right yender's the werry tree fer to choke him by inches an' do the purtiest dancin' on wind!"

Chuckling like a veritable fiend, the road-agent shifted location slightly, pausing again near where a scrubby tree grew not far from the verge of the abyss, to which spot Tinker's Dam hurried the detective.

Just as they were reaching that spot, Arnold Eades tripped and fell heavily, destroying the outlaw's balance as well; but that final strain served to snap those already seriously weakened bonds, and with a savage roar as his arms came free, Eades surged forward, knocking the hangman headlong over the rock to meet sure death below, then recovering his balance just in time to whirl and meet the vicious attack made by the second rascal.

Tinker's Dam lunged with an ugly-looking knife, but Eades dodged the blow, closing in, and then the two men wrestled breast to breast, both knowing that 'twas for life and death: life for the victor, and sure death for the vanquished!

A fall, a mad struggle, a blow and a stifled shriek; then one man arose to his feet, blood-dripping knife clutched in his reddened hand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CAPTAIN CROOK MAKES A PROPOSITION.

Holding full faith in his fellows, Tinker's Dam and Flickenger, Captain Crook left the final disposition of Arnold Eades in their hands, never for an instant doubting the result.

"They'll be more than delighted with the chance," he mused, grimly, as he

strode away through darkness, so familiar with this underground retreat as not to feel the lack of illumination.

"Rather rough on Arnold, for a fact; but it's only part and parcel of the bargain he made when taking up his present calling: by mankind shall the man-hunter be rewarded!"

In the low chuckle which followed one might have found confirmation of the statement made by Caspar Austin—that he was born utterly bad; for not the faintest trace of compunction or regret was to be found in the sounds; any ordinary man would have felt as much or more grief over death-dooming a blind puppy!

Passing on, then, the road-agent chief shortly after drew near another dimly lighted portion of his retreat, rising on tiptoe as he did so, in order to deaden the sound of his footsteps.

Pausing there in the darkness, himself unseen, while his keen eyes were at liberty to take ample notes, Captain Crook played eavesdropper as well.

Here his other prisoners were confined, treated with a certain degree of harshness which could only be excused by a seeming desire to spare his men closer duty as guards.

The enlargement was a fairly spacious rock-cell, lighted up, as were the others, by dimly-burning oil-lamps.

Seated opposite each other were Mallory Denport and Sagebrush Sandy, bound hand and foot with additional security in the shape of a leathern belt with rope attachment, the other end of which was secured to rock projections after such fashion as made escape without aid one of the impossibilities.

Not far away, and secured somewhat after the same fashion, though with milder methods, was Milly Blythe, pale and haggard, yet looking wonderfully well, when considering the trying ordeal through which she had passed.

The poor girl was feeling all the better that her imprisonment had not been apart from the others. With them to cheer and to encourage, the prospect did not seem nearly so dark and dismal.

The trio were talking now, as Captain Crook stopped to hearken; and again the old adage was fairly exemplified, for most assuredly Caspar Austin failed to hear aught agreeable concerning himself on this particular occasion.

Nothing was said about an escape, or anything spoken which seemed worth the trouble of hearing, and, after making sure of so much, the road-agent chief advanced with quick steps, to pause where the glow of the oil-lamp fell fairly athwart his face. Now, the man's really startling resemblance to his twin brother was brought out to perfection, and, while she knew the whole truth, Milly could not entirely choke back her cry of fright and amazement as she saw this ghost of her true-hearted lover.

"Well, my good friends," began Captain Crook, in airy tones and manner, "wonder if you have talked it all over and come to an amicable understanding? Shall I congratulate you on your good sense, or must it be the other thing?"

"Caspar, are you all devil?" asked his twin, in slightly unsteady tones. "Have you no mercy at all?"

"There, you've plunked the gold, brother, first blizzer!" coolly admitted the outlaw. "I'm all bad, as you put it. I was born bad, and each week that has passed over my head since has made me—no better, mighty fast!"

Oddly enough, he seemed to find pleasure in so blackening himself. He smiled as one might who had received a compliment. And, as his brother bowed his head and closed his lids with a half-smothered groan of wretchedness, Caspar laughed, gleefully even.

This peculiar mood did not long endure, however, and the road-agent tossed back his head like one flinging off a burden; then he spoke in even tones which sounded more like business.

"I've bothered you mighty little, so far, good people, because I deemed it

wisest to give you a fair chance to think, if not to talk it all over between yourselves.

"If you could reach any definite conclusion, so much the better for all concerned. If not—well, I'm here to supply any deficiency which may exist.

"To begin with: have you any lingering doubt as to my identity, Mr. Denport?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"No; I believe you are what you claim—Caspar Austin, nephew to Warren Clutter, deceased."

"Right as right, and my thanks for the honest admission, old Cut-and-dried! Nor you, Cousin Milly? Nor you, brother Jasper?"

"God pity me—no!" cried the other twin. "I wish there was room left for doubting; but there is no doubt!"

"That's hardly complimentary; but let it pass. A fellow can't look for everything nowadays, and the main point is gained. I am Caspar Austin, nephew to Warren Clutter, deceased, and co-heir with my brother Jasper in a certain vast fortune which still hangs in the balance.

"With so much fairly agreed upon, the rest ought to be pretty clear sailing, and I really begin to fancy that we'll get everything settled in time for an early dinner in friendly company!"

There was a tone of mockery running through all this, yet one could also detect a half-belief in his own assertions, too.

"Of course I fully understand that it wasn't altogether love for your fellow-sinner which brought you all the way out to this wooden country; still, 'twould be a pity for you to take so much trouble, run so much risk, and spend so many good round dollars of our daddy's without reward. So—open your ears, my good people!

"Whatever else I may be, no man has ever accused me of being a hog. I wouldn't take the earth if 'twas offered me on a golden platter. But I'm willing to take my decent share of the good things as they pass me by, and so right here I come at you, with both feet!

"I can't go back to what you term civilization as Caspar Austin, for good and sufficient reasons. If you ask what those reasons might be I fancy a single specimen will suffice.

"Going back with me would surely mean hanging for the killing of Horace Inchbald, and—well, I was born ticklish about the neck, and any such little joke as that would surely make me cough my brains out!"

Again the twin brother of this literal human monster bowed head and tried hard to smother a groan of heart-deep agony.

Mallory Denport turned paler, while Milly gazed upon that handsome demon like one fascinated by a serpent.

"That admission settles one point, and I hardly need remind you all that the fortune can't be finally disposed of without my death, or my free consent. So long as I am alive, and object to a settlement, you are wholly powerless. Am I not right, Mr. Denport?"

"Yes; but—"

"Good enough! Now, right here you can have my idea of settling the whole business on a fair and amicable basis. My proposition runs like this:

"I'll agree to arrange matters so that the estate can be finally settled, and the fortune fairly disposed of. I'll agree to pass forever off this stage, just as though death had claimed his dues, or I had never come into this world to upset a fair portion of it. Understand?"

"And in return for all this?" asked the lawyer, a brightening hope showing in both face and eyes.

"Well, of course, I'm not in this manner of business purely for my health," mockingly admitted the road-agent. "I've made a number of good strikes, but the cash has melted away just as rapidly. So, I propose this:

"I'll retire for the rest of my life on

a modest pension, to be paid out of Uncle Warren's fortune. I'll agree to never again show on the surface, but to live a reputable life, provided one other thing comes to pass. Give me this pension, and Cousin Milly for a wife!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CAPTAIN CROOK'S ULTIMATUM.

Possibly the captives ought to have been prepared for some such outrageous proposition, yet they were not.

Milly cried out faintly as she shrunk shivering away as far as her bonds would permit.

Mallory Denport gave an indignant exclamation, while Sagebrush Sandy flung all his bodily powers into an effort to burst his bonds, a very unbrotherly light glowing in his big brown eyes as they fixed upon that audacious and utterly heartless criminal.

Caspar Austin paid not the slightest attention to these demonstrations, moving nearer to Milly, his hands reaching forth as though eager to clasp hers in warm admiration, his eyes all aglow, his cheeks flushed with color which surely told there was but little acting in all this.

"I'll not try to win you through a lie, Milly. I have played many a cunning part before, and it's just possible I might succeed in blinding your eyes to the ugly truth were I to try my level; but I'll not do that. You shall see me just as I am—bad to the bone, evil to the core, almost without redeeming qualities, unless—"

"Milly, through all, through everything, I have held to one soft spot where all else was hard and calloused: I've never forgotten that my mother was a woman!"

Sagebrush Sandy shivered as though that title touched the raw, and his head drooped. Caspar paid no note, his whole attention given the young woman upon whose final decision it appeared as though his hopes for the future were fixed.

"Only for that one soft spot I'd have been a devil incarnate. With that one redeeming quality, little woman, I've courage to make an appeal to you, upon which may hinge—but let that part wait a while."

It was a swift break, and made none too smoothly, but that very fact helped convince his listeners that Captain Crook was in thorough earnest now, if he had never been before.

Still, not one of that trio ventured to speak just then. It was an awkward subject to handle, and neither of the bound men felt capable of doing it justice.

As for the young woman, she hardly counted for the time being. She seemed literally spellbound, unable to remove her fascinated gaze from that boldly handsome face, her own pale as death save for twin spots of color which marked her cheeks.

Captain Crook looked keenly at the two men, a half smile coming into his face the while. Then he spoke again:

"I wonder if you fellows have really grasped the situation? I wonder if you realize how completely I hold everything in my own grasp?"

Sagebrush Sandy looked up with an effort of will which served to steady both man and voice; then made answer:

"I know this much: that I'd gladly give up my own life if you had perished years ago!"

A low, mocking laugh; then came the retort:

"Well, now, isn't that a charitable expression to come from the loving lips of an affectionate twin? Cain, thy name ought to have been Jasper Austin—no less!"

"Are you all devil, brother?"

"Well, scarcely," with an abrupt change of tone and manner. "As yet I am human in one respect, and that is—"

He turned quickly to face the maiden once more, hands extended in additional appeal as he spoke, hurriedly if not brokenly:

"Will you give me that one faint

chance for the future, little woman? With you to guide, to shape, to hold in check when temptation may come strongest, I have faith I could live a fairly decent life from this time henceforward!"

"Will you give me that show, Milly? Will you help cheat the devil out of his final dues by— Will you help settle all this crooked tangle by becoming my lawful wife, Cousin Milly?"

Until now that curious spell had endured; but as the passionate speaker took another step her way, eyes fairly ablaze and face full of intense emotion, the maiden shrunk back as far as her bonds would permit, giving a low, choking cry which spoke even plainer than words could have done.

"For shame, sir!" cried Mallory Denport, indignantly. "Have you no manhood left?"

"Are you cowardly cur, as well as heartless criminal, Caspar?"

Almost simultaneously came these fierce rebukes, and after a glowing glance at each face in succession, Captain Crook flung up his hands as one who abandons a scarce-felt hope.

"That settles it, my good people, and here's trusting you'll never regret your decision," he said, after a brief silence, during which he no doubt was gaining command of his hot passions for the time being.

"Perhaps you were right, Cousin Milly, in refusing to give me the one chance I begged for. Maybe you know best, but—it's dollars to cents you're foolish, badly!"

"Now, away with all such soft silliness! It's sober business from this moment on to the end of the chapter!"

"Spit out your spite on us, Caspar, not upon a weak and defenseless child!" sternly cried his twin, striving afresh to burst his bonds. "We are men, and able to bear up against your very worst, but—"

"That's a lie, brother, and no man knows it better than yourself," swiftly interrupted the evil twin. "Even now you are shivering with fear lest—"

"With honest indignation, rather!"

"Honest nonsense! That is played out, Jasper, and I know—but, let it pass for now. I've got sober business to push, and if it hurts in the end, so much the worse for those who could but wouldn't!"

"What do you mean, Caspar Austin?" demanded the old lawyer.

"That fair talk has done no good; now I'll turn to foul actions!" fiercely cried the road-agent, eyes seeming on fire the while. "I gave all of you a fair chance, but you wouldn't take it."

"How could we, when—"

"You'll never have another like opportunity, so don't worry," with a short, ugly-sounding laugh. "And this is about the way of it, my dear friends."

"I've already made it evident that I can successfully play the part of another, and that removes the last snag from the channel."

"As I frankly admitted, I'm rotten to the bone, hence 'twill not be such a frightful strain upon my conscience—bah! I have none such! And why beat about the bush?"

"I'll kill you, Jasper, and never feel my pulse throb one iota the faster for it! I'll give you as decent a burial as time and circumstance will permit, then—play the remaining cards to win the big game!"

"Having fairly disposed of you, dear twin, I'll naturally have to silence our mutual friend, Mr. Denport. Not to do that might prove awkward should he turn up in time to clap a spoke in the wheel of my triumphal chariot: now, wouldn't it?"

No response. The others seemed fairly stupefied by this horrible cynicism, this utterly brutal diabolism.

Caspar Austin chuckled as he glanced from face to face, then spoke on:

"But I'm running just a trifle ahead of the hounds, come to think. You will

have to croak first of all, Jasper, as a matter of course. It would never do to permit any doubt as to the legality of my heirship to enter into the story, don't you see?"

"With you safely disposed of, I'll marry Milly here, and Denport shall play witness to that delightful ceremony. After—well, I reckon you have been given sufficient food for thought, my dear friends. I'll just take dear Jasper along with me, leaving the rest of you to think it all over. So, happy thoughts and pleasant dreams!"

At a sharp whistle several men hurried to the spot, and by command of the captain they quickly bore Sagebrush Sandy away from his friends.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MOONLIGHT EXECUTION.

Thus left to themselves guardian and ward bravely strove to cheer each other up, although heaven knew how little ground they had for hope.

All had looked dark and dubious enough when left in company, but now that Jasper was removed—for what cruel end?

Neither dared ask, neither would attempt to answer this question.

While outwardly maintaining a cheerful demeanor, within himself Mallory Denport was bitterly bewailing the mistaken hope which lay at the bottom of their journey; and especially did he regret having yielded to Milly's wishes so far as to allow her to bear him company into this lawless, god-forsaken region.

And so the hours slowly dragged their length along until the day was spent and another night had fallen over the country, although the prisoners had no means of surely taking note of time.

Completely worn out by their apprehensions, both ward and guardian were asleep when the crisis came.

Shots and cries, shouts and furious execrations roused them from slumber, the ominous sounds rumbling through the cavern rendered doubly impressive by those sound-confining walls of ragged rock.

In vain Mallory Denport strove to burst his bonds, thinking far more of Milly than of himself in those first moments of bewilderment.

The poor child sobbed and moaned, shivering in the extremity of terror, yet wholly helpless to flee or to hide.

Then came the echo of rapidly falling feet, and, a moment later, a stalwart figure came rushing into their place of confinement, giving a glad cry as he caught sight of their pale, scared faces under the dim lamplight.

"Milly, darling! Thank heaven that you are here, and—safe, my poor little girl! Safe at last!"

Mallory Denport gave a cry of strongly conflicting emotions as he both saw and heard, for—surely this was—Caspar Austin!

He was given time for but the one glance, for, a moment later, Milly was being lifted to her feet, a keen-edged knife was cutting away her bonds, and then, clasped tightly to a broad bosom, her face was covered with burning kisses, between whiles a voice giving her the glad assurance that their worst trials were now over.

Too seriously frightened, too intensely shaken for full realization of all this, Milly lay almost lifeless in those strong arms, and it was not until a full minute had passed that attention was paid to the lawyer in spite of his cries and exclamations.

Then, gently lowering the maiden to the ground, where her back would find support against the wall, Austin stepped across to where Denport lay, quickly performing the same service for him as far as severing bonds and restoring to liberty was concerned.

It was with some little difficulty that the elderly gentleman was balanced upon his feet, but then, as their rescuer was

about to return to the more agreeable duty of caring for the maiden, he caught an arm, gazing keenly, searchingly into that handsome face like one fighting against both fear and doubts.

Austin laughed, shortly, at this, then forced a smile as eyes met eyes, after which he spoke, kindly:

"Well, sir, are you convinced at last? If you only knew—"

"You are Jasper, not—you are Jasper?"

"I am Jasper, and poor Caspar is—I can't say it yet! Enough for now that we are saved through the opportune arrival of a strong force from town, which has—may God have mercy upon his sinful soul!"

That voice grew husky and choked, and the rescuer turned away with a passionate gesture, like one whose emotions are far past expression.

By this time the reaction was coming, and poor Milly had rallied in part, only to fall to sobbing and weeping hysterically.

The next few minutes were devoted mainly to her needs, Austin soothing the sorely agitated woman as best a lover knows how, while Mallory Denport little by little puzzled the matter out to his own complete satisfaction.

That wondrous resemblance in face, figure, voice and even color had bewildered him at the outset. He fancied this armed and stern-looking being was none other than Caspar, the evil twin, but now—

"You are Jasper!" he cried, with great relief, as he drew nearer the young couple. Thank heaven for all its mercies, even—even if it has been mighty slow in getting here!"

Milly laughed hysterically at this anticlimax, but the other frowned like one in mental torture.

"If you knew—but not now!" catching himself up with a visible effort of will power. "Come, friends; this is no place for you longer. Come! We will leave here, and God knows how devoutly I wish we might as readily leave all memory behind us!"

"Then—Caspar is—" stammered Milly, shrinking in fright anew as memory of the evil twin was thus recalled.

"Caspar will never harm you further, dear child. Caspar is—will be—come!" with a touch of fierce feeling in his tones as he tightened his clasp and moved with the maiden toward the exit, motioning for Mallory Denport to follow after.

"I can't say it, even yet! I must—give me yet a little time, I beg of you, Milly!"

All ominous sounds had died away ere this, and the cavern itself seemed fairly deserted, since they met no living being while winding through the rather intricate passage to eventually come out beneath the brightly twinkling stars.

Here signs of the recent conflict were apparent, several motionless shapes lying in awkward attitudes among the rocks and scrubby bushes which lay in front of the robbers' retreat.

So far nothing could be seen of the rescuing party from Skeleton Camp, or of the road-agents who might have escaped death in the fight.

This fact struck Denport as a little peculiar, and stopping short when fairly outside the cavern, he flashed keen glances around on all sides, then speaking:

"Where are the rest, Jasper? Surely they haven't—they are still near here, of course?"

"Wait!" spoke the guide, moving onward. "Yonder are horses for our riding; don't you see?"

Both Milly and Mr. Denport caught sight of the tethered animals at that moment, and then, as they gained their side, the rescuer spoke further:

"I feel like thanking heaven for your safety, good friends, but as for myself, I could almost wish death had come in place of liberty. For—poor Caspar! After all, the same mother bore us!"

Breaking down in voice, Austin caught Milly under the arms and swung her deftly into the saddle, motioning then for Denport to mount and bear them company. The animals went forward through the night until a dark, low object showed almost directly ahead.

"The rescuing party from town," Austin briefly explained, riding between the other two and checking the horses when but a few brief yards from that silent group of armed men.

A few seconds thus, when he gave a low cry, and as though this was a signal for which the party there was awaiting; the group opened up, drawing back to each side, showing a scrubby tree, from a stout limb of which depended a human body!

Low gasps of horror broke from both ward and guardian, for each one recognized the garb, the shape, the—surely that was Caspar Austin!

It was the exact spot which had, hours before, been elected as the place of execution for Arnold Eades, and from the same cedar which was to have served as gallows for the detective, now hung this body!

A brief silence; then the sternly sad tones of the rescuer rose upon the night air, shaping the words:

"The wages of sin shall be death—death eternal! You see all that is left! The death of a felon, although—God help me!—I would gladly have sacrificed my own life to have saved his. And yet, why should such a wicked life have a brighter ending?"

"Caspar was born to be bad. He was too utterly evil to live among honest people. He sinned, and now—God grant him rest!"

Like one who dared not trust his tongue further, Austin moved a few feet nearer that corpse as it hung motionless from the cedar. He leveled a revolver, aiming with care, then fired. At the shot that rope parted with a twang, the corpse shooting downward to strike the rocks far below!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE END OF AN EVIL LIFE.

A thrill of irrepressible horror ran over the recently freed captives at this totally unexpected action, and poor Milly uttered a cry of repulsion as she shrunk from the one she had up to that moment firmly believed to be her lover, Jasper Austin.

But now—could he be so cruel, so heartless, so—

That shot was still echoing among the rocks, when the rescuer turned away from the shivering tree with its dangling rope, speaking hoarsely as he again caught Milly's horse by the rein:

"Come! Let us leave this hell of horrors! 'Twill kill me if—the devil!"

For, just as the little party turned away from the men who stood at the chasm, peering over the escarpment and striving to see what fate had befallen that hanged wretch, a swift rush was made from the adjacent cover, and a stalwart figure fairly leaped upon the assumed sport, hurling him backward and out of the saddle all in an instant!

At the same moment a volley of shots were poured into yonder ranks, and cheering madly, the second company charged, on carnage bent!

"Come!" cried the man who had so swiftly mastered the sport, urging the horses to renewed flight as he leaped into the saddle thus vacated. "You, first of all, Milly darling!"

"Jasper—thank heaven!" gasped the maiden, almost fainting, yet with true love's acumen, recognizing her heart's lord and master.

A savage imprecation accompanied that unexpected overthrow, and the man rallied as quick as a cat, but, ere he could fairly secure his footing, a vicious enemy leaped straight at his throat, striking with knife as he came!

"Now, you and I for it, Caspar Aus-

tin!" was cried, as the two strong men closed in death-grapple.

It was a fierce and desperate fight while it lasted, for each one of the road-agents knew that he was doomed, if taken alive.

There might be a lack of law in and about Skeleton Camp, but there was any amount of justice according to Judge Lynch!

Taken wholly off their guard, more than doubly decimated by that first steady volley as they stood peering over the verge of the death-chasm, the outlaws fought at a terrible disadvantage, and there could be but one termination to such a surprise.

Those who went down in death were perhaps the luckiest of the gang, for the few who yielded alive were speedily bound, hand and foot, and then given cordial assurance that other ropes were woven for their neckties.

Jasper Austin—the true Jasper—hurried Milly and her guardian away beyond peril, for the time being, then begged the bewildered lawyer to guard the girl, as he might the apple of his eye, handing Denport a full loaded revolver as further protection, then adding:

"Caspar—my poor brother—is over yonder. I hardly dare hope for his escape, but—oh, why must such things be?"

Like one driven almost to the verge of distraction, he who had been termed Sagebrush Sandy hurried away to where the fight was now ending, and almost the first thing he saw was—

Two men mortally injured, too weak for further fighting, yet still locked in death-grapple!

Side by side, panting, gasping, growling; both bleeding freely from ugly hurts, neither one able to inflict further injury, yet each one as viciously vindictive as at the outset.

The fight at an end, there were no lack of friendly hands to assist the Sport at Large in caring for his death-marked twin, while others looked after the no less seriously injured detective.

Apparently no one knew better than Caspar Austin how surely his life-sands were running out, but he still maintained the magnificent nerve which had served him in so many critical emergencies, and never more faithfully than in this, his latest as well as his most daring imposition.

Dying though he surely was, "Captain Crook" retained his nerve and senses up to the last, talking distinctly, recklessly, yet with evident truth, now that nothing was to be gained through deceit.

And so the whole puzzle was cleared away, not alone for his twin, who sat holding head in lap, big brown eyes slowly leaking tears too sad and bitter for audible sounds, but for the entire company as well.

"I've played you dirt enough in life, Jasper, without doing it after death," he explained, with a low, still mocking chuckle. "Oh, you poor fools! What's the use in being honest, if honesty means stupidity? And what a merry dance I'd have led you all if—Satan toast that Eades!" with an access of fury, fierce as it was brief-lived.

"Only for him I wouldn't be like this! And—prop me up where I can see the devil gasp out his life, Jasper!"

But then, as his bodily powers failed more rapidly, Caspar Austin appeared to forget his especial enemy, taking pains to clear up the obscured record of those recent days, and make the innocence of his twin stand out bright in the eyes of all men.

For, after all, this evil genius was not wholly bad; he had one redeeming trait: that was his love for his twin brother.

Only for that love, hidden though it surely had been for years, the end might have been different; Jasper might have hanged in place of Dick Leach, upon whose form the sport's garments had been placed.

Arnold Eades added his bit of explanation, telling how he escaped death by killing his chosen executioners instead, then hurrying off for aid, which he luckily ran squarely into, being a strong party from Skeleton Camp out on the hunt for Captain Crook and his crook cohorts.

The two men died within a few minutes of each other, but, true to his fierce vow, Caspar Austin lasted longest, and his last request was to be lifted far enough to see the detective's corpse.

In silence Jasper complied. One look, a low chuckle, then came the death rattle!

All that was mortal of Caspar Austin was buried near the scene of his death, there to lie in unmarked grave until the last trump shall sound.

Mallory Denport was more than satisfied with the outcome, since he had obtained sufficient confession, and no lack of "solid men" who could bear witness to the death and burial of Caspar Austin.

That death removed the sole obstacle to settlement of the Clutter estate, and notwithstanding the harsh usage and mental tribulations he had "run up against" since coming to the vicinity of Skeleton Camp, the man of law declared that he was fairly repaid for it all.

Milly required several days for recuperation, and the care which she actually needed came as a godsend to Jasper Austin.

Anxiety for her helped deaden his own grief, and at the end of another week, when the trio took passage on the stage bound for Dirigo, and toolled by Billy Johns, the much-tried Sport at Large looked more nearly himself.

It was not until just before starting that Jasper told all: made clear just what was to be his fate had his evil twin carried to the end that daring scheme of imposition and false identity, and the dropping of the hanged body, dressed in the chief's clothes, into the death chasm.

He was to have been held a close captive until after Caspar, as Jasper, received the vast inheritance, then—well, Caspar swore that he would free his brother, at length, to clear his record, but only after he himself had disappeared with his fortune and his still more precious bride!—the scheme surely of a Satanic brain.

'Twould take many years to completely wipe away the effects of those few busy but terrible days. Memory would never cease; yet deep down in Jasper's noble heart would ever linger the undying love of a twin for his brother.

With so many eager tongues to spread the wonderful tidings, of course Sagebrush Sandy was fully cleared in all eyes. And those who had been most eager to "run him up a tree," as the real Captain Crook now were loudest of all in vowing that they "always knew it!"

The will of Warren Clutter was duly carried out, in one shape. Caspar was dead, but Jasper lived, and—so did his wife!

And that wife was—

But why repeat what the reader already knows?

THE END.

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